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I was pleased to read recently, in a generous review that appeared in issue six of Andrew Jordan's excellent magazine *10th Muse*, that the mix of TTA changes with every issue. They are never exactly 'themed', but I do try to consider how stories could complement each other, and—sometimes just by accident, I admit—quite often there can be a fairly loose thread running between them. In his review Andrew Jordan said, quite rightly, that TTA5 was heavily loaded with 'horror stuff'; and, indeed, a few readers did comment on the fact that a number of those stories dealt with the topic of transformation. I thought that TTA6 had more of an urban feel to it, while TTA7 was clearly the t-shirt issue (yeah, well). I could draw a few comparisons within this issue too, but as there is no conscious, deliberate theme, I wouldn't want to stretch a point too far.

Actually, I really only mention this because it gives me a good opportunity to plug *Last Rites & Resurrections*, the first anthology of collected TTA stories, which is available now (see back cover and enclosed flyer for more details). It was a difficult task deciding which stories to include, or rather which stories to leave out, and it was mostly Martin Simpson's eponymous story in this issue that helped me finally make up my mind. It occurred to me that more than a few stories dealt with either or both of these themes, in one way or another, and that by collecting those stories together the book would have a cohesion that a simple 'best of' anthology perhaps wouldn't. That said, I haven't always taken this theme too literally, so at the same time it's a varied read, with one or two lighter (in context!) pieces to leaven the mix.

As I hinted at above, there were some stories equally good in themselves that do not appear in the book, and to the authors of those, and to TTA readers also, I would like to say that just as this is not exactly a 'best of' collection neither is it necessarily the only collection that will feature

stories from issues previous to this one. As time goes by, I expect other themes to emerge, that will allow equally good collections, and stories that didn't quite fit into *Last Rites & Resurrections* might well fit into something else. The subject of transformation readily offers itself, for example (Mark McLaughlin's wonderful magazine *The Urbanite* explores this very theme in its next issue, by the way).

As I write this I'm not absolutely sure how many current TTA subscribers have been with us right from the beginning, but I hope, naturally, that some of you will want to buy the book for those stories you missed in the early issues (all of which sold out, by the way), and even that some of you will buy the book just because it'd be nice to own one. Make a great Christmas present too, wouldn't it? Either way, because your support is always appreciated, the book is available to you at the rock bottom price of £3.99 inc p&p. This offer is for subscribers only, remember. I'm trying to reach a whole new audience by publishing this anthology in book form, but at the same time I'm running the risk of losing life-saving sales to the very people who would presumably be amongst those first in the queue (ie you), hence the attractive price—a price which, at two quid less than the shop price, might in turn persuade more people to subscribe to the magazine.

I hope it works. I'll let you know. Meanwhile, if anybody would like to help sell the thing by distributing a few flyers, approaching their local bookshop, whatever, please just get in touch. I can assure you that all such offers would be more than appreciated.

I hope you enjoy TTA8. Let me know, okay?

10th Muse: £2.50 from Andrew Jordan, 33 Hartington Road, Southampton SO14 0EW.

The Urbanite: \$5.00 from Urban Legend Press, Mark McLaughlin, PO Box 4737, Davenport, Iowa 52808, USA.

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Last Rites & Resurrections

Martin Simpson

Every morning I drive the same route I drove when I still had to work. I take State Road 40 through the Ocala National Forest, forty miles from Barberville to just this side of Ocala. The road has two lanes, with a passing lane every five or six miles, first for the east bound traffic, then for the west. Each time I come to a passing lane, I pull into the slow lane and let everyone go by. I'm always on the lookout for dead animals.

The first dead animal's voice I ever heard came from a brown and white basset hound with a broken neck. He was lying in the grass beside the westbound lane in Astor, and I only noticed him because I had stopped behind a school bus that was picking up a couple of kids. The dog looked like Barney, my neighbour's basset when I was growing up on Lincoln Street in a small town in Illinois. The resemblance made my throat tighten; how long had it been since I'd thought about that neighbour, or his brown and white dog? When the bus's red lights stopped flashing and it moaned into first gear, I pulled my BMW off the road instead of following.

The dog lay on its side, his head lolling back at an impossible angle, one ear chastely flopped across his head, shielding his dead right eye from the sun that was just beginning to burn through the morning fog. I knelt beside him and patted his side. He wasn't bloated. He didn't smell. There was nothing wrong with him except for his neck, and it looked as if he might get up if I twisted his body and arranged his head just right.

I couldn't put him in the BMW; I had chosen the leather interior package, and who knows the mysteries of a basset hound's first

few postmortem hours? It had to be the trunk.

I carried him carefully. As I leaned over the empty trunk I heard his voice.

It wasn't an audible voice — the dog's mouth didn't move or anything—but it was English. It said, "A motorcycle hit me twenty minutes ago. My legs are short and I never get along much faster than a trot; I meant to stay in the grass beside the road, but I guess I didn't. The motorcycle had a shield on to protect the rider from the wind, and the bottom of that shield hit me just beneath my ears. My body went numb right away, and I wish I had stayed in the grass beside the road."

I stood cradling him over the dark gape of the trunk, but he wouldn't say anything else. Finally I gently lowered him in beside the spare tire. A muffled sound like gravel in a twisting sock came from inside his neck when I pulled back the arm that had been supporting his head.

I drove back toward Barberville, thinking: *This is it, Chris is taking his toll.*

When my son Chris was twelve years old, he knew more about chemotherapy and bone marrow and white blood counts than any twelve year old should. The doctors had diagnosed him just before he turned eleven. Very rare form, they said. Not responsive to traditional treatments, they said. Give me everything you've got, Chris said.

God, he was a beautiful kid.

Shortly after his twelfth birthday we all knew. So I quit my job and Sarah took three months off, and we took Chris all around the states, everywhere he'd wanted to go: DC,

Denver, San Francisco. We went skiing in Aspen, walked through a stand of redwoods in Washington state, and visited Mark Twain's home in Hartford, Connecticut. The Museum of Modern Art in Chicago, the Alamo, the Liberty Bell, and the beach in San Diego all bored him. He loved Sea World, Pike's Peak, the view from the Sears tower in Chicago, and the arch in St Louis.

Before we could make it to New York City, Chris started fading. We brought him home, and in ten days he was gone. We buried him six weeks before the broken-necked dog spoke to me in gruff, phlegmy English.

As I drove back towards home with a dead dog in my trunk, I thought my grief had finally undone me. I'm not particularly good at expressing emotion. I had only cried a few times since Chris's death, but every night I went to bed with a heavy, brittle feeling in my chest, and every morning it was there waiting for me when I got up. Every day, on my way to work, I would ask myself: *How long will this last? How long can I stand it?*

And now, here was an answer. I fully expected to hear more voices on the trip home. The moss that hangs in grey clumps from trees alongside the road might whisper my name. The garage door opener, clinging to my visor just above and in front of my left ear, might tell me where to drive next. The sly windshield wipers might softly counsel suicide.

But I heard no voices on my way home.

I live alone in a small house with a back yard that slopes down to a small lake. Sarah and I had been in the process of splitting up when Chris was diagnosed. The funeral was the last time we had seen each other.

I got a shovel from the dusty-quiet garage and buried the basset in the back yard, in the shade of my magnolia tree.

Eight days went by before the next dead animal spoke to me. I heard it at the exact moment I saw it, a huddled mass in the opposite lane, yearning to breathe, period.

"A station wagon hit me," it said, "and my intestines blew out my asshole."

The words came slower than the basset's had, and they were carefully enunciated.

I pulled over shakily, and when no cars were coming I pulled across the road and parked in the grass. It was a cat, grey and thick-necked, an unfixed male. Its intestines were where it said they were. It didn't have anything else to say.

I buried it beside the basset under the magnolia. The intestines had made transport and burial difficult and unpleasant. Since then I keep a plastic tarp in any vehicle I drive, and I never travel without a pair of long rubber gloves.

I am not the type to hear dead animals' voices in my head. Which is to say, I'm not crazy. I don't fit the profile of someone who is susceptible to the allure of the superstitions and mass-market voodoo of marginalised humanity. I've never bought a magazine in a supermarket checkout line, and I never read the horoscope, even for 'fun'. I don't believe in ouija boards, seances or tarot cards; I've never had my palm read; I've never even made a wish before I blow out the candles on a birthday cake. I don't believe that aliens live and walk among us. I do believe in God, but I manage to ignore Him until some disaster hits. Even then I am held in the grip of a cowardly self-consciousness, and I can't bring myself to pray with any fervour.

And yet.

Over the last four months I've buried nearly thirty members of the animal kingdom under my magnolia, and every one of them spoke a few well-chosen words to me, post-demise and pre-burial. I've interred a half-dozen cats, eight dogs, four raccoons (two couples, united in death just feet apart), three squirrels, and two armadillos.

I saw a man pulling a deer around toward the back of his pickup once. I stopped, suspicious that he had somehow hit the animal on purpose, not sure what I would do if he had. But the deer set my mind at ease.

"He couldn't help it," said the deer, a medium-sized male with an unimpressive rack. "I was running through the woods and I got carried away. I know better than to leap without looking, especially near a road. But I can feel God in me when I leap; I was meant

for it. This man tried to miss me, and my feeling is: better to have leapt and lost..."

The deer wasn't the only dead animal with a sense of humour. Although two armadillos don't constitute a large enough sample from which to generalise about a whole species, I'd have to say the armadillo has a healthy, good-humoured sense of the absurdity of its position in the world.

"Look at me," the first one I found said. "I'm basically a dinosaur, unchanged for millions of years. I should be sharing the road with a 1993 Saturn? That car has a micro-computer that controls its electrical systems; I've got *scales*, for God's sake. It's not easy being an anachronism."

The second armadillo I found was severely mangled, a condition made more horrible by the animal's already naked, pink-and-grey vulnerability. I had to carry it by its tough rope of a tail; parts of it seeped and sagged all the way to my new truck.

"My only natural defence is to curl up into an armoured ball and outwait my opponent," the armadillo said. "Not too effective against steel-belted radials."

I never did go back to work full time after my last trip with Chris. I was a financial planner with one partner in our own small but reasonably prosperous practice. Two small business clients, a total of forty-five employees, plus a handful of couples that had been referred to us. I did a little of everything: set up IRAs, mutual funds, individual deferred comp packages, some tax planning. Sarah is a mid-level administrator and RN in an Ocala hospital, and we did okay. I put everything I could away, invested in the stock market. IBM in the mid-70s, Apple in the early 80s, small bio-medical research companies in the late 80s, tobacco stocks all the time.

When Chris was diagnosed I decided I didn't need to work anymore. When I finally came back, I kept a handful of clients whom I like and cut back to two mornings a week in a small office in Ocala. After the funeral and Sarah's departure, we went through a very adult divorce. Sold the house, didn't fight over money; we both have enough. I bought this medium-sized lot on the lake, with the

little house on it, and Sarah bought a modest two-bedroom near her hospital.

After I buried the grey male cat in the sandy soil beneath my magnolia, next to the broken-necked basset, I sold my BMW and got a three year old Ford pickup. I put the tarp and rubber gloves in the back and began making a trip down State Road 40 once every morning and once every evening, just before sunset.

Sometimes as I'm driving I hear an animal but can't see it. I always pull over and search, but often I don't find it. In the course of one such search I realised that I could identify each species by voice. Some animals sound like you would expect them to sound, if you expected them to talk: dead dogs speak quickly and with tangled syntax that often produces circular sentences, while deceased cats are slower and more careful, measuring out the meticulous pronunciations of a Latin teacher. Squirrels communicate in staccato snippets that sound vaguely like Vietnamese to my ears. The posthumous speech of two other species I also associate with foreign language accents; the wry humour of armadillos comes wrapped in the harsh back-of-the-throat consonants of German, while clever raccoons trade in the nasal delicacy of French.

When I feel the occasional desire to go back to work full time, I entertain the notion of becoming either a medical examiner or a detective. My avocation has given me the appropriate mindset for either occupation. In the hieroglyphic carnage of State Road 40 I see patterns; the visceral geometry of each individual metal-vs-flesh collision tells a story that I can read with increasing acumen.

Single direct hits leave one dark blotch on the pavement, attached by fragile vapour trails of blood that stretch to where the body comes to rest after its short and final migration. More often there is multiple contact: a rear wheel finishes what a front wheel started, or the impact against a front fender ricochets the hapless beast against one of the dark humps and sinews of an undercarriage.

The worst accident scenes feature bizarre zigzag patterns that indicate a poor creature's careening path from one vehicle to another, sometimes from an unforgiving westbound chassis into an indifferent east-bound grillwork. After this sort of accident, the animal invariably confesses its confusion to me. "Everything happened so fast," it will tell me. "I lost my balance and couldn't get it back."

The 'best' scenes result from glancing blows, which most often produce quick and relatively painless broken necks. In many of these cases the victim literally does not know what hit it, and the bodies invariably have an attitude of peaceful drowsiness about them.

In a way, I feel better about my life now than I ever have. When I worked full time I was good at what I did, and I had a good relationship with most of my clients. But I had so little time for anything beyond 'maintenance': work, sleep, minimal conversation with Sarah and Chris. A forty hour work week is a grotesque invention, if you think about it. That's just too much time. That much work insulates you from the rhythms of nature. I never soaked in the birth of a day at dawn or its death at dusk; I never sensed the slow turning of the seasons in the air. The birth, growth and death—of plants, of pets, of my own son—these things I never really noticed.

I probably spent more time with Chris than most fathers spend with their kids. We went to Disney World and the beach, saw some spring training games in St Pete, had supper together as a family at least three or four nights a week. I loved him fiercely from the moment he was born, but that feeling always struck me as biological, instinctive. Later, as his personality developed, I found him likeable; in his innocence he found me wise. Even after Sarah and I began to grow apart she said I was great with him. The night after he died she told me she felt he never loved her as much as he did me. We were sitting across from each other at the kitchen table when she said this, the overhead light cruelly exposing the lines on her forehead

and her dark-circled eyes. I'll never forget the misery in her voice; I have no idea if she was right.

The dead animals I talk with show no signs of self-reproach, and very little concern for the mates and offspring they leave behind. Mostly they tell me the stories of their deaths. Sometimes an animal will spend its last energy regaling me with descriptions of the things it loved most on earth. One squirrel rivalled Wordsworth with her posthumous paeon to a kind of small nut that she favoured. Her sensual description—the tender cream of its waxy interior, the ripe brown smoothness of its outer shell, the delicate cap that sheltered its rounded top—was mesmerising. The aesthetic alienness of a tin can, stripped of its wrapping and missing its top, elicited the fascinated admiration of one raccoon.

I used to be troubled by the gore that I see on State Road 40, but it doesn't bother me anymore. Partly, I suspect, because the mind can adjust to most any situation after enough repeated exposure; ask a paramedic, or a trauma surgeon in an emergency room, or a mortician. But part of my newfound ability to face the bloody wreckage left by violent collisions comes from the animals' own non-chalance. Not a single animal has ever dwelt in self-pity or compulsively bemoaned its mortal wounds to me. In fact, they demonstrate a remarkable equanimity about the physical processes their bodies undergo after death as well. Sometimes I come across their bodies shortly after they die, but most often I don't arrive until after at least the first few flies and worms have begun their humble ministrations. I have never heard an animal begrudge those scavengers their due. After four months on State Road 40, what doesn't bother my dead charges usually doesn't bother me.

The one exception was when I came upon an orange female tabby just sunset a quarter mile east of the St John's river. I pulled over immediately, but it took me ten minutes to find her. She had been hit in the hind-quarters, but crawled into the deep grass

beside a fence post before giving up the ghost, or whatever it is animals give up when they die.

"This will be hard on you," she warned me as I bent over her and stared at her distended abdomen. "Two males and three females," she said. "I would have delivered them in eight days, but a van hit my legs and now there's no hope for them. One of the females wouldn't have made it anyway, but the others were fine."

I knelt beside her and felt the tiny waves and ripples from inside her. "Maybe it's not too late for all of them," I said, wondering where a caesarean incision would be made on a cat.

"A mother knows these things," she said in a very tired voice. "This will be hard on you." She said no more.

The first kitten died just as I laid the mother on the cold corrugations of my truck's bed. It started mewling the moment it died—too young, I suppose, to have the power of speech.

My house is less than nine miles from the St John's river, but by the time I got home a chorus of pitiful mewling filled my head. Five small dead voices. After a moment there were only four, then three. By the time I had dug a small sandy hollow—outside the shady reach of the magnolia's furthest limb now—the last voice had died away. The tabby had been right. It had been hard on me.

That night I awoke from a nightmare listening to the echoes of five pre-verbal voices. I put on some clothes and walked into the back yard. The sounds and smells of two in the morning always fill me with the hoarded privilege of sweet secrecy, and I started to walk down to the lake. As I passed the magnolia, I sensed a stirring. I knew without looking that small eyes were opening, small limbs being stretched.

I kept walking, afraid that if I stopped, or turned, or squinted into the shadows, the spell would be broken. I heard behind and around me the soft rustling of many paws, padded and rough, three- and four-toed. At the water's edge I headed east. I dared my first look at my spectral companions after I

had moved halfway around the lake. A raccoon trundled along on the ribbon of packed sand to my left. To my right five kittens trailed on unsteady legs behind their mother.

I made a complete circle around the lake that night, and when I got back into my bed, the tightness in my chest was gone for the first time since Chris died.

Tonight I pulled into my driveway with a bloated cocker spaniel in the back of the truck to find Sarah's car parked there. She got up from where she had been sitting on the porch and walked over to meet me as I got out of the truck. She smelled the dog and stopped a couple of yards away.

"What is that?"

I shut the door and walked back toward the bed. "Dead dog. Found him a couple of miles down 40."

"Why did you bring him here?" she asked, upon her toes to get a glimpse of the body.

"You won't want to see this," I said. She turned away quickly when I lifted him and started for the corner of the house. "Why don't you go inside while I take care of this? I'll be in in just a minute."

Digging is easy in sandy North Florida, and in ten minutes I stepped into the kitchen and took a drink of the ice water Sarah had poured for me. I went into the bathroom and washed my face and arms, and returned to the chair across the kitchen table from my ex-wife.

"How many are there?" she finally asked. She was looking out the sliding glass door toward the magnolia tree.

"More than twenty," I said. I didn't know what else to say.

"Why?" she said.

"It makes me feel good." She stared at me. "It seems like they deserve better than to just lie beside the road and rot."

I watched her while she thought about that, and I considered what a fragile thing a marriage is. It's as easily killed as any of those animals in the back yard. She sat across from me and I couldn't begin to tell her a true answer to her question. What would she think if I said that the animals talked to me

after they died? If I said that I was their caretaker, their bereaved, their final confessor?

After some reflection, Sarah let the subject drop. She started to talk about what had brought her here. She said she had needed to be alone for a while after the funeral, to sort things out. She talked about being mad at Chris for dying, about blaming me, and about sleeping too much. She talked about getting a prescription for Valium from her doctor, about numbly going through the motions at work, and about loneliness.

As she talked I found that I still loved her, and that I had missed her. Some clinical part of my mind took note of the details of her face and body, instantly familiar again, but I felt no sexual attraction to her. I suppose that my administration of the last rites so often in the previous months imbued me with something of the priest's mortification of the flesh. In the absence of physical desire, though, I still found myself wanting Sarah back.

Soon she tentatively raised the subject of our marriage. She started to leave long pauses in her sentences, which I started to fill. We gradually realised that we both wanted to try again, but neither of us knew how. The wounds and grievances of a severed marriage rose up and silenced us. My mind was full, but I was mute. I expected her to leave.

But she said something about Chris, and I said something I remembered him doing, and before I knew it she was crying. Soon talk and memories and tears poured out of both of us and filled my small house on the lake.

After three hours of this a strange formality settled over both of us, and we both knew it was enough for tonight.

"I should be going," she said, getting up. "I have to be in at eight tomorrow."

"Okay." I followed her to the door, and we both felt stiff and self-conscious. I knew then that Chris was still between us, and that he would be for some time.

She found her keys and we stepped out onto the front porch. She looked at her car, and then down at her keys, and then back up at me. I kissed her, but the kiss didn't kill the awkwardness, and she stepped off the porch.

"I'll see you again soon?" she asked.

"I hope so," I said.

She got into her car, and then leaned back out. "I'll be extra careful to watch for animals crossing the road."

"Please," I said.

The car retreated down my driveway, and she gave me a little wave. After she was on the road and out of sight I stood on the porch and listened to the receding sounds of her car. Finally there were only the sounds of the breeze and the night. I stepped back into my house.

A garden of dead animals blooms in my back yard. Some nights when I'm walking around the lake, they just show up. I never know when it's going to happen. At first I thought maybe it happened the same time of the month. Moon phases or something. But that wasn't it. Then I thought maybe it had something to do with the weather, but that couldn't be, because sometimes they materialise after dry days and cloudless sunsets, and sometimes after rain and low skies. I only know it's happening again once I'm walking in the back yard and find myself surrounded by them. They pad all around me on soft feet, and each retains its personality. The squirrels maintain their small, nervous movements, the dogs their manic sociability, the raccoon his oddly-masked guilelessness, the armadillo its impervious dignity. The cats stalk and pounce, and deep in their throats they softly hum their rightness with, and in, the world.

On such nights I walk among them and do not willingly go back indoors, St Francis in the final stages of mourning. I think Sarah's coming back, but I will still walk around the lake on nights when I can't sleep.

One night, I hope, when I am walking with them, we'll be joined by another.

Will he look in my eyes, in that quiet, crowded yard, and wonder at his presence there, and know me?

○ *This is Martin Simpson's first published story (it originally appeared in The Silver Web). He lives in Gainesville with his wife and cats.*

Windows of Flesh

Joel Lane

I was Lisa's friend when no one else wanted to know her. Remember that. When she stopped eating and had black eyes from lack of sleep, I combed her hair and told her she was safe. I was Carol then. We were together as children on this strange housing estate in Erdington. It was like a model village, neat rows of little houses. If you went up to the top of the hill, you could see down across Newtown and Aston to the city centre: factories, tower blocks, motorways, waste ground. Lisa used to stand there for hours, watching. She told me once that she'd like to scatter the pieces of home all over the view, and then go down to join them up. She was nine years old then.

Lisa's parents divorced when she was five. Her father ran a bakery in Leeds. She never saw him. The maintenance cheque came in the post every month. The address was typed, not handwritten. Her mother had several boyfriends over the years. None of them gave Lisa any trouble, but they all seemed to regard her as irrelevant. It took Lisa years to relate this to her mother's attitude. She talked to me sometimes about her father. How the rows had kept her awake at night. How she'd come to hate mealtimes. How she'd always run away when they fought, and later seen the bruises and scratches. "I thought if I didn't see it happen, it wasn't real."

We used to watch TV together after school. Then when Lisa had a cassette player, we'd sit in her room and listen to music. Lisa wanted to be a singer, but she never learnt to play anything in school. We didn't talk much when other kids were nearby. She was always getting picked on or getting into fights. Even the teachers didn't like her, because she talked like an adult. One of the boys said she

was a changeling, and everyone called her that even though they didn't know what the word meant. Lisa's favourite place was the unused garage at the back of her mother's house. It was always cold there, and empty except for some boxes of old magazines. There was a faint smell of petrol and damp. With the light out and the door locked, it was like being underground.

Things changed between us when Lisa reached puberty. She grew breasts and I didn't, so she decided I was a boy. That was how I became Carl. She had to catch the bus to school now, and started to make new friends. I was scared. She might not need comforting any more, but I did. To remind her what being alone was like, I started breaking things or slamming doors behind her back. Eventually, she told me to fuck off and stop trying to upset her. In her wardrobe, I found an old children's book—an illustrated story called *Who Will Comfort Toffle Now?* I put it in the garage, on the cement floor, and made Lisa go in there. She picked the book up and started reading it, then crying. When I moved towards her, she tore the book up and threw the pages at me. For a moment I felt like she'd torn me up. I ran hard into the wall, smashing my face against the bricks. Then I got up and did it again, running back and forth between two walls like I was a puppet. I thought she'd stop me. But she ran away. I was lying there, dazed and bloody, when she came back. Very gently, she put her arms round me and cuddled me. Her face was blurred. I could feel blood still trickling from the corner of my mouth. She kissed it away. That night, we slept together for the first time.

"Your skin's like glass," she said. "All the colours are underneath." Her hand ran over

me, then stopped. "You haven't got anything." She meant between my legs, where there was only smooth continuous flesh. "You're just like a doll." Her disappointment made me feel empty. I held her in the dark while she masturbated. I hadn't realised how much rage there was in that act, how an orgasm could be as childlike as a tantrum. My hands were still raw. Her sweat made them hurt. Afterwards, she lay with her head on my chest, which was as flat as a screen. Under the ribs a picture began to form. "What's that, Carl?" I said nothing. "*My God.*"

It was a slow process, like developing a negative in a late-Victorian darkroom. I smiled invisibly as Lisa tried to focus her eyes on the picture. "It's a little boy," she said at last. "Holding a dove. There's a sort of beach ball at his feet."

"That's right," I said. "It's a Picasso painting. And it used to hang above the fireplace in the house where you were born. Your father kept it. But it's a little girl, not a boy. She killed the dove while playing with the ball. It's a picture of you and me." She stared as the picture faded, and I felt her tears hot on my skin.

Another night, I showed her the Chinese willow pattern in various shades of blue. I'm good with blue. Lisa got very tense and started trying to describe all the elements of the picture. I said, "The picture's meaningless unless you know the story. Do you?"

She shook her head, gripping my ribs with her pointed fingernails.

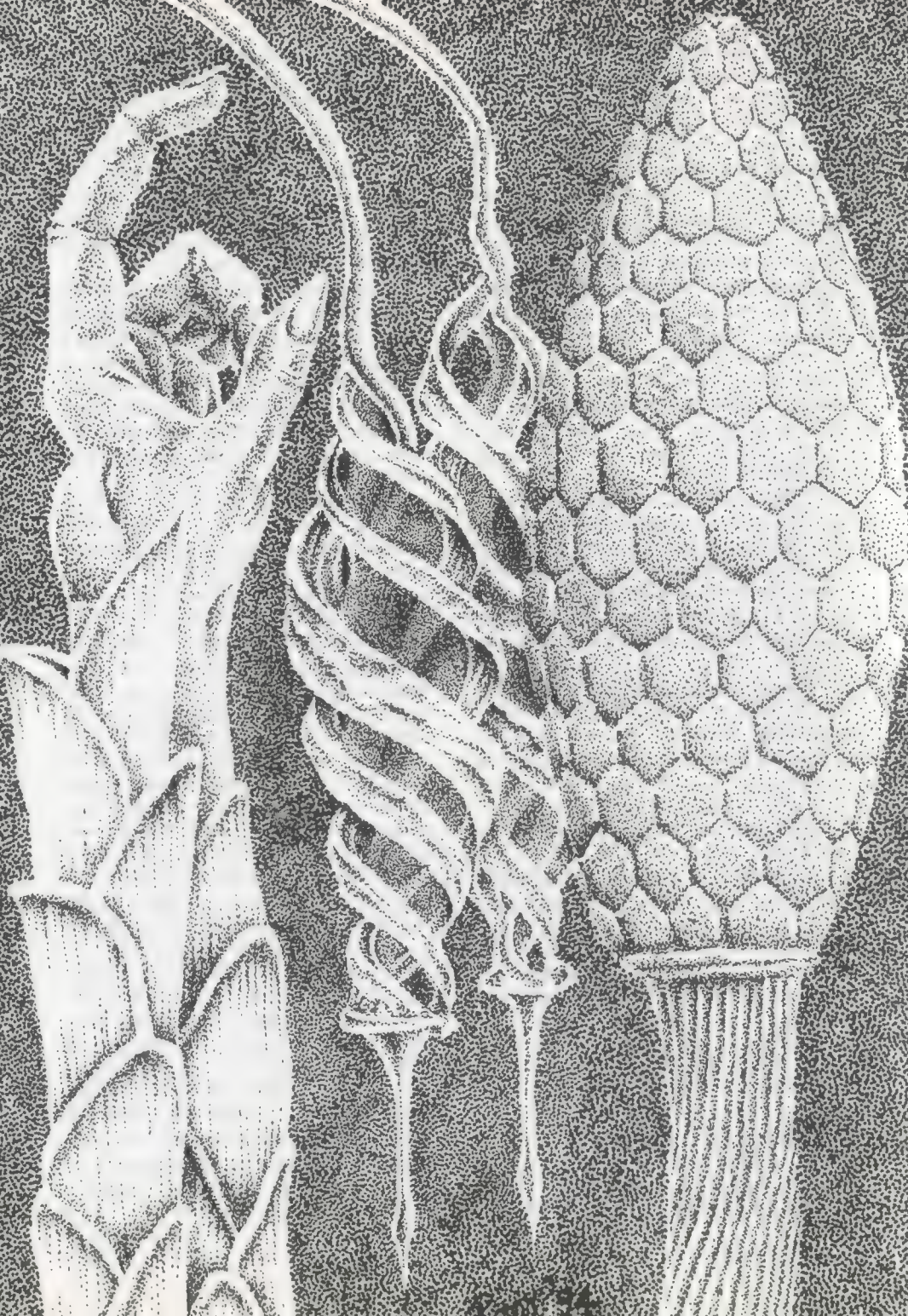
"You were four years old," I said. "In the cabinet on one side of the living-room, there were three ornamental plates. They all had the willow pattern. One night when you were in bed, you heard your parents screaming at each other. Then there was a crash. And another. And then another. The next morning, the plates were gone. You never knew who'd thrown them. Months later, you were still finding little bits of china behind the furniture. Blue on one side. You kept them and tried to remember the pattern. Then, when you thought—"

"I don't believe a fucking word of this," Lisa whispered. "You're making it all up."

"I haven't finished. When you thought your mother was going to find the pieces, you ate them. They cut you inside. You had to go to the hospital. It was quiet there. You cried when they sent you home again." Lisa turned away from me and faced the darkness at the edge of the bed. She was shaking. I lay still, and she cried but I didn't comfort her. After that I found it easier to sleep. A couple of years went by. Then she met Jake.

He was a fourth-form boy who played the electric guitar. Lisa still wanted to sing. She was in the third form by now. They got a band together and practised in the garage where I'd injured myself. It was harsh, atonal stuff. Mostly feedback. They had two cymbals, but no drums. The garage walls provided a reverb effect which they liked. Lisa didn't *sing* so much as whisper and scream, while the others thrashed out a storm around her. Jake was the only one who could play. When I watched them, I could almost hear my own voice breaking out of her. The pain twisted her mouth. I knew what she was seeing. After each practise, the other two band members went home and Jake stayed with Lisa in the garage. Whether it was over-enthusiasm or bad luck I don't know, but their precautions failed. When she knew the child was inside her, Lisa came to me. For the first time in years. "It's too late for comfort," I said. She nodded, panicked. Her eyes told me she trusted me completely. I told her what to do. First, she had to get Jake to score some Valium. That wasn't too difficult in her school. The rest was down to Lisa and me.

It happened after midnight, when her mother was asleep. Lisa rolled a wine-glass up in a towel and smashed it into tiny fragments with a hammer. Then she crumbled a large slice of chocolate cake on a plate, mixed in the ground-up tablets and the broken glass, and pressed it all together into a lump. I ate half. She ate all of it. Then we went into the garage. Lisa bolted the door and lay down, coughing gently. I kissed her. There was blood on her lips. For a moment, I could see myself through her eyes: the darkness in my mouth tearing my face apart. I remember everything. □



Waiting for the Wireman in 1974

Sam Ravens'craft

On the edge of everywhere, dirty dress blowing with the breeze, I wait...

If you were to leave the Bellsley Social Club this evening (leaving behind the band who play only Bobby Goldsboro, the electric lighting that hides your true self, and the one-armed bandits who steal your cash); if you used the rear fire exit, walked six litter-strewn yards and joined me on this broken wall, you might notice the difference between two worlds.

Contained within that squat building is the bubbling heart of a community—the only place to be in this town because it's *literally* the only place to be.

Out here is wasteland, a place of long, wild grasses, power pylons and rubble; of forgotten things. This is where urbanisation runs down before giving in to countryside's strangling grasp.

And if you were a stranger to these parts, you might just stop and wonder why a twelve year-old is sat on her own out here. But then you wouldn't have heard about Lily of the Field.

And from my vantage point, I watch Billy Morten walk the path that marks the town limits. He's carrying the three things I want more than any others.

“What're you doing, Billy?” I ask, walking along beside him, staying on the wild side of the pavement.

“I'm not supposed to talk to you.”

“I know.”

“No one is.”

“I know.”

“You're a bad example.”

“I know.”

“They reckon you're dangerous.”

“I know. And they're right, because, one Friday, October evening, I'm likely to make someone—such as yourself, Billy—see.”

“See what?”

“See what's all around you, if you'd only care to look.”

He continues walking, not even glancing at me. Eleven years old and not yet interested in girls—in women, yes, but not girls, and certainly not this one, with her messed-up hair and skinny, skinny legs.

“So, what're you doing?” I ask again.

He hugs the three priceless objects tighter, nudging them under his pale chin, making good and sure he can't drop them. “I'm in a gang. We've got a den. I'm taking stuff to it. This rope's for a swing. This bottle's for throwing at. This skull's for warning, to scare off other kids. That's what you do when you're in a gang, mark out territory and defend it.”

My gaze scurries over the objects, one by one. Somewhere, somehow, behind the glowing skies, there must be a guiding power, a spirit of the moment that makes things as they should be. How else could these perfect possessions have been delivered to me on this of all nights? “It's certainly a nice skull,” I tell him. And it is.

He glances down at the dry, yellowed surface and into those deep, dark, eyeless sockets. “I found it in the back garden,” he says, “beneath a bush. My Dad reckons it's a deer. He says that five hundred years ago this whole town was one big park for the Duke of somewhere, and it was full of game—that's like animals. There's supposed to be loads of bones just lying around.”

I stop. Billy doesn't. He continues along the path as I call after his t-shirted back, "I know something else you could do with those things, Billy, something much better."

At last he turns to face me, but walking backwards, still away from me. And his blue eyes squint painfully into the setting sun as he asks, "Like?"

"Well," I tease, still not moving, "to find that out, you'd have to come with me."

"They reckon you're a witch."

My voice grows, to fill the increasing distance between us. "They reckon lots of things, most of 'em wrong. I'm just a girl who likes to hang around the back of things. Isn't that where you always see me, Billy, behind supermarkets, and 1940s prefabs; behind abandoned aerodromes, libraries and shopping centres; around the back end of the day and the back end of the month? Always with a bit of wood in my hand, or kicking a tin, or kicking my heels? Always in places whose front and back show different faces? That's where you'll find me. So, how about it? You going to spend this empty evening throwing rocks at empty bottles? Or do I show you some magic?"

He stops and considers for a moment, stood at the junction with Rosemull Road. This is good, this is what I want. But then he shrugs, "I have to go. They'll be waiting."

He turns his back again.

"Billieeee..." I implore, half-running to catch up with him, determined not to miss out, "there are everyday miracles. They come round so often you take them for granted and stop noticing them for what they are. This is a once in a lifetime miracle. Pretty soon now you'll be grown up. And you know what? Once that happens, moments like tonight never present themselves again."

"How would you know?" snaps the boy, still not looking at me, "you're just a kid too."

"Have you ever seen your parents having fun? I mean *real* fun, the kind that kids have? Did you read *Peter Pan* this summer, like your teacher told you? Remember Wendy Darling, what a stupid cow she was? Made the wrong choice and had the rest of her life to regret it. Want that to be you?"

He stops and turns and shrugs and sighs, and he says in a world-weary way, "So, what's the plan?"

"That'd be telling, and this is not the time for telling, not yet. But soon..."

And he steps over a green hop-scotch line, chalked into the paving stones by some long-ago kids. And he walks six litter-strewn yards.

The social centre still leaks Booby Goldsboro as we walk past, cutting across the wasteland. It's that time again—the best one—when the sun's gone but it's not yet night.

You can believe in things. You can believe in the cold, low moon, watching us through grey, power-pylon lattice-work. You can believe that lengthening shadows each have a movement of their own.

From high on leafless branches, crows throw their warnings (or threats, or greetings, or things you could never understand) into the still air.

We approach Colley's Farm.

"C'mon," I tell Billy Morten, pressing on ahead, "he's this way."

"Who is?"

"You'll see." And I climb the crooked black fence into the farm.

He doesn't follow, just gazes into the field's vast openness as if it were Hell, his wide eyes seeing invisible dangers in every root, under every rock. "Are you sure about this?" he asks. "I heard the farmer shoots anyone who goes on his land. And then he sends the body away to a slaughterhouse, with the cattle, so no one'll ever know."

"So how do you know?"

"I just do."

His hopeless face squirms for long moments. Then I sigh and explain, "This is a cereal farm. This is a wheat field, there are no cattle."

"Jimmy Hall disappeared after going in this field." His eyes grow larger as his voice takes on a knowing tone.

"Jimmy Hall went to Bolsover, with his mother—after Jimmy Hall's father 'disappeared' with Brenda Turton from the post office."

"Oh."

Satisfied I've allayed his fears, I walk on, through a dirt track cleared in the stubble. A fieldmouse skeleton lies in the dust to my left, its bleached, picked bones too tiny for most to see. Reminders of death are all around us tonight—but then they always were.

I hear Billy climb the fence behind me, and the hurried crunch of his steps as he catches up, still with the three objects. Good. I can't do what I have to without them.

"Is that the kind of thing you talk about in your gang?" I ask. "Murder?"

"We talk about loads of things."

"But mostly murder?"

"Well, yeah." And then he adds, defensively, "But sometimes we talk about football."

I walk on. "So, who else does your gang say is a murderer?"

"Only Mrs Anderton at the corner shop. We know for a fact she stabbed her husband ninety-seven times with a kitchen knife. Dr Cooper, he eats kids—three already, more to come. Then there's Liza Drang. And..."

And the list goes on, from A to Z and back again, recounting every last person who's 'disappeared'. The truth is, the last seam of the last pit in Bellsley was mined out late last year. In the twelve months since, more and more people have left town, looking for work. This is no mystery, this is no secret. Billy and his friends' wilful misinterpretation of the evidence brings a smile to my lips, and I tease, "Is that all? And there was me thinking Bellsley was positively filled with killers."

"It is. You need eyes in the back of your head round here." And he glances around as if to prove the point.

"Have you told the police?"

"No."

"Best you don't, I reckon."

"Yeah, we reckon too."

And, nodding in total agreement, we approach the scarecrow.

Jack O' Lantern loses his head.
On tip-toes I remove the pumpkin from the scarecrow's shoulders—gently, feel-

ing its weight in my arms. And I say, "Thank you, Mr Lantern," looking up at the ragged, crucified figure on its crude post. "Say thank you, Billy."

"Me? Why?"

"You should always thank people for letting you take their heads."

Billy's looking around for the farmer, only half-paying attention. He says of the scarecrow, "It can't hear us, it's not real."

I look into the pumpkin's crudely cut eyes, deeper and deeper, deep into them, to the unlit candle at the head's carved-out centre. "Oh, he can hear us, Billy Morten." My voice is low and long. "Never doubt that. You don't stand around in one place for as long as he has without learning a trick or two." And I gently place his pumpkin-head on the ground. Gravel chafes my shins as I kneel over it, removing the 'lid'. And with a closed-eyes wish I light the candle. The orange glow grows to fill the chamber, till it finds escape through the eyes, nose and mouth.

I put out the wish with a shake, and toss it aside. "Now then, Billy, pass me the skull."

The three objects rattle as he takes a tighter grip. "What for?" he demands. "It's the gang's. I'm sworn on a blood-oath never to let anyone else have it."

The pumpkin-head's lid slots neatly back into place, and I stand up, clapping dust from my palms. I tell him, "If someone took your head away and didn't replace it, you wouldn't be very pleased would you? Why, you'd probably come looking for them, one stormy night, appearing as a lightning-lit silhouette in their open doorway. Then you'd throttle the screams in their throats and take their own head as payment. And in the morning, when the storms had subsided and the townsfolk had set about clearing up, the police would gather round. The chief of police would tip his hat back by the peak, take one step back, shake his head and ask, bemused, 'Well, how do you suppose a boy's head ended up on an old scarecrow like that?'. Isn't that right, Billy? Isn't that exactly what would happen?"

"You don't frighten me. I know it's just straw."

"Fair enough." I pick up the warm pumpkin and walk off with it.

"Where're you going?" Billy sounds smaller than before.

"Leaving you alone with Jack." I tell him. "Not superstitious are you? Only in a few seconds it'll be dark, and he'll be wanting his new head. Tell me, Billy, what do you suppose scarecrows get up to at night when there are no grown-ups around? Do you suppose they come to life? Do you suppose they dance the dance of the soulless—with unwilling partners? Have you ever wondered about that?"

"Wait!"

I'm back by the fence now. So I turn and sit on it. I watch him, shouting to him as his gaze darts between me and the bird-scarer, "Ever asked yourself why so many things are called 'Jack'? Jack O' Lantern, Jack Frost, Jack in a Box, Spring-Heeled Jack, Jack Ketch, Jack the Ripper, Jack the Lad, Jack B Nimble, Jack B Quick, Jack Flash sat on a candlestick! Jack's the Devil, Billy-boy, and there's a little of the Devil in all of us. Don't believe me? Just ask Mr Lantern here."

And I hold the pumpkin up so its orange flicker casts eerie shadows across my face.

"Okay! Okay!" he shouts in a panic. "It can have the stupid skull!"

I place the deer skull on the scarecrow. He looks impressive. It's his birthday, and I intend to make it the best he's ever known. "There," I tell him, pulling breeze-blown hair away from my eyes, "that's better. Now you're a real scary-head, Mr Lantern, *real* scary."

"Are you okay up there?"
"Of course I am!"

Rope coiled loosely around my shoulder, I scale the power pylon. Reaching for my next hand-hold. Bit by bit, rivet by rivet, hauling myself up. This is a climbing frame, like the one in any school. Where the likes of Billy Morten would plummet to their doom, betrayed by jangling nerves, I climb on. It's a matter of attitude.

I stop for a moment, nearing the top, and take in the view. Unlit countryside disappears into silent blackness. My eyes follow

the curved line of pylons till they fade from sight, like some ancient race of giants, frozen in their final march into forgotten lands.

From up here, you can hear the wires hum.

Billy watches from the field below, keeping his distance from the skull-head scarecrow we've propped against the pylon's huge leg. The problem with Billy is that, for all his gullibility, he doesn't believe.

I toss one frayed end of the rope down for him. It lands by his feet. And taking hold of it he calls up to me, "I really don't think we should be doing this."

"Don't be soft!" I climb on, letting out slack as I go.

"But you could get fried!" he shouts. "I heard about a kid in Leeds..."

"You hear too many things!" I lean forward, recklessly, gloating, enjoying the sense of freedom in a way that can't fail to disturb. "Frying's for other kids, ones like you. Kids of my calibre, well, there aren't so many of us but we get away with things! You know why? Kismet! You won't understand what that means but it's much bigger than a word with six letters has a right to be! Now, can you get on with it?"

Reluctantly, he ties the rope around the strawman, though still trying to keep his distance.

I climb on, this time all the way to the top. And I sit there, again surveying my kingdom of darkness.

Billy steps back from the scarecrow.

"Done it?" I ask.

"Yeah!" he replies.

"Good!"

Just in time. Just beyond the furthest pylon, to the west horizon, the sky flashes white. A storm, and it's heading this way.

Driving wind tries to force me off my feet. Driving rain fills my eyes. I pull at the rope, leaning back with all my weight. Hand over hand, hauling the scarecrow up to join me.

This is a mad place to be.

"Look at it, Billy!" I shout down to the boy, hoarse, as thunderbolts smash into the next field. An oak creaks and topples, thrashes to

the ground, sheared in two. I shout again, "Can you feel it, Billy? Like you were a part of it?"

This is no ordinary storm. This is a storm of coincidence, one which could only arrive on such a night. Fork lightning straddles the pylon, for one brief moment threatening to skewer us.

"We've got to get under cover!" yells Billy, cringing.

"And miss this?" I pull harder, breathlessly. I have to finish before the storm passes. "This is it, Billy! Or once in a lifetime miracle! You have to here at times like this!" I pull harder still, and yet harder as the rain-laden scarecrow gets heavier and heavier. "He's on his way!"

"Who?"

One final heave with the last of my strength, and the scarecrow is with me. My lungs demand air in sharp bursts but I yell, "Let me tell you something, Billy, a tall tale even you've not heard! Whole lifetimes ago, when we were all just a twinkle in the storm's eye, something crashed to Earth. Call it what you will—object, thing, man, woman, whatever. Where it came from, no one knows. Where it was headed, no one knows. But that thing brought magic with it, the first this world had ever seen. And it hit the ground hard—so hard even the impact's echo took on a life of its own. But the original object, it just got straight up, dusted itself down, and climbed again the staircase of the Milky Way. Not for it the Chinese torture of self-doubt, questioning or recrimination. Not once did it look back. Not once did it wonder about the young planet it had collided with. Not once did it think of its echo. But that echo, Billy, it travelled round the world, driven by the collision's momentum and its own restlessness. For millions of years, without a focus. Until, in March 1923, it made its home in the wires. And you can call him the Wireman, Billy, because that's how he'll arrive tonight."

Wires radiate in four compass points from this central pylon. I tie the scarecrow to a stanchion in readiness.

"And don't ask me how I know these things, it's enough that I do. But if you're one

of the lost or abandoned—and we are all the lost and abandoned, Billy—then you will, on cold, quiet days, hear the Wireman passing. And who hasn't, at some time or other, stood under a row of pylons and sensed him?"

I take the bottle from the scarecrow's coat, and watch the long, stretched reflection of the storm run in the wet glass. This is the strawman's second gift of the night. The Wireman can do many things, but some need a catalyst. So I toss the bottle high into the air. Lightning smashes into it, glancing off, colliding with the wires, like a drunk. The distant lights of the social club black out. The wires hiss and hum and crackle and spark, throwing out snaking fingers of electricity that grasp and grope and search and tease. Until, finally, they reach other and, then, the strawman. God, how he glows. Through eyes and nose and mouth and ears. And his deer skull face lifts to look at me, slowly at first, then more certainly. And his eyes gaze into mine, full of nothing but white light.

This is his third gift.

Scary-head floats into the air like a kite, tethered to the tower by the rope. After fifty years stood in a field this is the time of his life. Straw fists uncurl, glow, then discharge zig-zag streams of electricity into trees, scaring crows from their shelter. Right now, he could frighten anything. "Look at him, Billy!" I call excitedly, rain driving into my mouth. But the boy's gone, running off back home, and over the fence. Scary-head's gone too, snapping the rope like candy floss, wrapping himself in the storm, firing off more lightning bolts just for effect. And he takes the storm with him as the club lights come back on. And soon everything's quiet, as if none of it had ever happened. And I can hear the Wireman again as he continues his endless journey along the wires.

But if you're one of the lost and abandoned—and believe in magic—and if you're caught in a storm one night; and if you look hard enough you might, just for a moment, glimpse a figure at its centre, revelling in his new-born life.

But you'll have to be stood round the back of somewhere special... □

Danny's Family

Hick Turnball

“All are welcome,” lied the locked door against which Danny sat. I knew this would be where I’d find him, in the grounds of the closed-up church. The door with its false promise and the vacated building beyond constantly attracted him with their resonance of his own life. On good days, he’d wedge himself into the small stone porch out front and work on the message he was scratching into the stone-work with a fencenail, a comment on the status of this building proclaimed by the notice painted on the board outside. “This still-consecrated church is maintained by the Redundant Churches Fund, St Andrew-By-The-Wardrobe, Queen Victoria Street, London,” it read. “Christianity is bankrupt,” Danny was scratching out in reply.

That was on the good days. Today, he was around the back, by the other door, with the abandoned building a hollow wall between him and the rest of the world. He didn’t react to my rustling approach through the weeds covering the path so I forewent speaking and sat down silently beside him, deliberately taking up a position close by him in an attitude that mirrored his own. Then I waited for him to react.

Danny was always hard to communicate with. He was all edge, striking sparks off most everyone with whom he came into contact. His abrasive manner meant lean times on the streets trying to touch people for small change. His lack of success often meant a hunger that put him more on edge. Unchecked, the process could send him all the way over, I believed. He was my friend. I was just trying to hold on to him.

Eventually he turned to look at me. I turned to look back at him. He said nothing. I

said nothing. He scratched his bare knee through a hole in his jeans. I scratched his bare knee through a hole in his jeans. That almost won me a smile. “I waited for you an’ you never came,” I said, trying to exploit that small opening, trying to get inside to reach his obvious pain. Gradually he opened up.

The story came out slowly. “I was headin’ down to the market to meet you an’ the gang when I thought I saw someone I knew comin’ towards us up the street. As we got closer to each other I saw who it was. It was my brother, Richard. I hadn’t seen him since...I left. We’d never been close or nothing. He was grown up an’ had his own place before I was even born. But I was so surprised to see him there, just suddenly there, walking towards us, that I stepped in front of him an’ said hello. That’s all. I couldn’t think of nothin’ else to say, just ‘hello’. Richard, he...he backed away from us as if I’d accused him of some crime then stepped around us an’ hurried away. He didn’t even look back to see how I reacted.” He didn’t even look back to see Danny reeling behind him, stunned by the passive violence of his denial. Concussed by his hit and run. The bastard, hadn’t he and the rest of his family hurt Danny enough?

I could see that the encounter had brought back all Danny’s memories of his feelings of isolation within that family and his ultimate sense of being rejected by them. Feeling keenly this rejection, eventually he turned away from them himself. When he finally left his home, he didn’t even bring away his name. (“Call me...Danny,” he said when we met on that first road we travelled together. “Yeah, why not. Call me Danny.”)

Now, eighteen months later, meeting Richard again, he had to face up to the tota-

lity of their rejection, face the fact that, apparently, they had been pleased to see him leave, to write off the loss and close the book on his life. Like all of us who live a life of leaving, slipping away from people we feel didn't care, he had held on to a private hope that they had missed him once he was gone.

"Sod 'em, Danny," I said, "it's their loss, man. You don't need 'em, you got us. Me, Trip, Liz, Makka... We're your family. We're here for you. Right?" Danny looked away, not replying. "Right?" I said again, rocking him with a push from my loosely-clenched fist.

"My own brother, man." He was still trying to explain his pain. "I mean, I left an' all 'cos they weren't good to me. But he acted like he never knew me ever. My own brother."

"Danny, he's gone. I'm your brother now. I mean it. Look at me." The rightness of what I'd just said struck at my heart, faltering its beat. I tugged on the old wool of his outer jumper, dragging his eyes back to mine. "You an' me, we're brothers. I mean, truly. We. Are. Brothers." I reached out with everything I had to bring to him the sudden truth of my words. I held him, drawing him towards me, pulling him back from his edge, embracing him, willing him to the point of tears to share in this new reality. "We are brothers. Danny, we are brothers."

"C'mon," I said, a thousand years later, "the market's shuttin'. Everyone else'll get the best of the fruit 'n' veg if we don't get a move on." I steered him back towards the centre.

A sense of belonging. On your own terms. It was practically a manifesto for run-aways. When we reached the market too late to claim anything but muddy scraps we set off again looking for our closest friends, confident we could share some of their bounty. Over a gut-purging meal of end-of-the-day discarded fruit and raw vegetables, I defined for them mine and Danny's new familial relationship. My main reason for doing this was to show Danny publicly my commitment to what I'd said when we were alone. To show him I meant it. Over and over again I said it, painting layers and layers of greater and

greater emphasis. "This is my brother, Danny. When you talk to him, you're talking to my brother. When you talk to me about him, you're talking to me about my brother." Brushstrokes, sweeping from one end of the assembled group to the other, then back again. My brother. Danny, my brother. Forward and back. Forward and back.

I was also after their support for my attempt to hold on to Danny. They knew his melancholy bent as well as I did. As I gave a brief account of Danny's meeting with his (old, dead and gone, never was) brother, Richard, I could see the light of realisation shine back at me from the faces of Makka and Liz. With this encouragement I finished my story with a verbatim recount of my declaration to Danny that we gathered here together now were his family. Makka, God bless him, took his cue. "You're spot on there, man. We are family." He put his arms around the shoulders of Liz and Trip, who were sitting with him on the top step of the door stoop while Danny and I, the last to arrive, stretched across the lower steps. "We are a family," Makka went on, "in every way. A family of the best kind, 'cos we want to be together. To be with each other. To be there for each other. Danny's family." He looked down at Danny and said to him, quietly, forcefully, each word a certainty, "I'm your brother, Danny."

"I'm your brother, Danny," echoed Trip.

"And I'm your sister," finished Liz, closing the circle. There on the stair we wrapped him up until it was impossible to tell where one ended and another began. Danny's family.

Our bellies full and percolating, we pooled our cash reserves and headed for the offie, in search of liquor to toast our fortunes' new dawn. Danny looked a whole lot happier as we walked through town than when I found him behind the church. It gave me a buzz to see him that way. We went via the shopping precinct toilets to void bowels loosened by our fibrous meal and as we washed our hands, Danny initiated a waterfight with a sweep of spray in my direction. Rattling out of his wooden box, the tired old attendant chased us out with his mop and Danny ran

before Trip and me, laughing louder than either of us. Dammit, he was happy!

It was a warm evening. Spring was turning into summer, a full moon lit a clear night sky. That meant we'd have to keep a weather eye on the temperature, retrieve our bedding and settle down before the day's heat snaked away. It was a night to look for some company to keep a body warm.

Once we had our bottles and cans, we returned to the precinct and scaled the outside, backside steps to the small concrete garden of the neglected north quarter piazza. The rhythmic, multi-layered hum of a quick-strummed guitar sounded out from the fore, telling us others had beaten us to the oasis. As we walked up the last few steps, still not in sight of the piazza, I silently hoped that there weren't too many there, else it may have cost us a couple of our precious beers to buy a place in their space. At least the music spoke well of their mood: upbeat. An argument over sleeping pitches could have triggered one of Danny's mood swings, sweeping away all the work we'd put in to bring him back around to the good.

There were three of them, sat together in the middle of the piazza, where the guitar player was using the light from the central lamp post to watch her playing. The other pair sat cross-legged a little way back in the kinder light of the shadows away from the sodium glare. The guitar player was good, intense, working low rhythm and high melody up and down the board. I was sorry when she stopped as we approached. I was a little less sorry after she looked up from her guitar out into the darkness towards us, her eyes only slowly adjusting to the light contrast. That made it seem as though she spent an age staring at me. I liked the idea of being stared at by her. I did a little staring back.

One of the pair sat back in the shadows made their introductions; Makka made ours in return. That indirect invitation made and accepted, we joined them on the ground. Eight of us—our beer should stretch that far. We began opening cans and bottles and passing them around.

The guitar player was called Sands. Putting her guitar aside to accept a turn on a bottle, she shifted over to the rest of us. As she moved, the light from above glinted across the string of earrings hanging from her left ear. Impulsively, I offered to trade one of my gold bands for a silver one of hers. "Then you'll have silver, gold, silver, gold," I pointed out. She dipped her head a little and shrugged her shoulders in casual agreement. Contact.

The beer was good enough, the night was still warm, company was coming. Maybe. As Sands and I exchanged earrings, Liz was explaining to Japp and Holly—Sands' audience—how that afternoon we other five had become related, become Danny's family. In her telling, she put her own cast on it, backlit by her own past. Only child, strict parents, pregnancy scare, threats of relocation to distant relatives. Runaway. "Now, I've got *four* brothers. I'm not alone anymore, I mean, I've been around these guys for a while, but *now* I'm not alone anymore. Y'know?" A sense of belonging. On your own terms.

As she spoke I realised how tough it was going to be to explain to strangers—to people outside our family—where we were coming from. We're Danny's family. For real. That's reality now. It's not just words. Though the words were important. Saying it was important. For when we spoke it became so. Could others be made to understand that?

"Could I be a part of your family?" Sands asked me, breaking my concentration.

Again, without thinking, I blurted out a yes. Immediately, I realised that was just lust and lager talking. I wanted to share something with her but not in the same way I wanted to be together with Danny, Trip, Makka and Liz. Thankfully Sands could see that. She took another swig of beer and licked the last few drops from her lips. "Maybe a cousin or something." There was a tear in her shirt low on the left side. As she moved around sometimes the pale flesh beneath showed in the light, sometimes it was in shadow.

"Aye," I agreed, "a cousin. A few times removed, maybe."

"A distant cousin."

"A really distant cousin."

"Hardly related at all, in fact."

It was shaping into a good night. I glanced over at the others, looking for signs of critical views of the content and subtext of mine and Sands' conversation. They were happily wrapped up in their own doings. Danny was laughing at something Makka or Japp had said. I excused myself from Sands and shifted over to where he was sprawled. For the second time that day I took up an attitude that mirrored his own, this time sat opposite him. I looked at him. He looked back at me. With a barking laugh he swatted away my hand as it started towards his knee. "My brother," I said. "Danny, my brother."

A ghost of a smile touched his lips, but he said nothing. Damn me for a fool but I never asked him to say the words himself, to complete the connection. Before I could say anything else, he turned his head towards Sands and flashed his eyes in her direction then back to mine. Danny's eyes. While his manner, his words, his temper often cost him everything, in the right circumstances, those bright, shining eyes, green like meadow grass, could still win him his way. It was as if all the positive aspects of his personality, all the light in his life shone from them. Not for the first time, I gave in and followed their lead, crossing back over to rejoin Sands.

But I swear he was happy. When I left him he was happy!

Sands and I were getting on really well, more than just passing the time. Even so, I began to notice the cold. Sands and her two friends were new to the town, just passing through on their way north. They had intended to risk crashing out in the piazza, using any precinct that came along in the a.m. as a kind of wake-up call to get them back on their way early. Meeting us, I think, persuaded them to stay a little while longer. At least I knew Sands was bending that way.

I took hold of her hand and said, quietly, just between the two of us, "There's an old underpass close by where we usually crash when we're in this part of town. If you an' your friends would rather sleep late, undisturbed, mebbe me an' you should go down

there now an' stake a claim on it. We wouldn't want to lose it y'know?"

"Yeah, I know," she said in reply.

We stood up together, still holding hands. "Me an' Sands'll collect our gear an' take it to the underpass. Save you the trouble," I said to Makka and the rest. "You can stay up here an' party a little more then bring Holly an' Japp along. Later."

"Go for it," Makka cracked, all feigned innocent agreement. I let that slide, everything was smooth. A little light-headed now I was on my feet, I buzzed off with Sands, humming a tune she'd picked out earlier on her wild guitar.

Privacy is a one o'clock in the morning thing on the street—too late for the greater public to be abroad, but early enough for the brethren to forsake their beds for a little while to give you some space. My tired old plastic groundsheet crackled as I laid my unzipped sleeping bag down it like a mattress. Together they hissed and snapped as Sands and I then lay down together, pulling her own wrap over the top of us. We moved slowly, each warming the other, both heating the air trapped between our bed and cover. Time and its meaning evaporated away, lost to ninety-eight degrees of heat...

The sound of pounding feet crashed and echoed around the underpass. Someone loomed over our bed, dragging at me. I swore at them and shoved them away. Fuzzy with drink and thwarted passion, I couldn't get my head round what they were trying to communicate. Finding some focus at last, I recognised the intruder. It was Liz, frantic and insistent. What was she saying? Danny? Something about Danny?

Danny. "He just...he just walked over to the edge and...and kept going." Her voice wept, her eyes spoke wildly, desperately, urging me to understand. "Danny...he...he fell." Danny and his edge. Whirling blue lights swept over the walls of the underpass, a few seconds later an ambulance flashed by. No sirens, my dispersed mind registered. No sirens on empty streets after midnight. Just a silent rush. Like falling. Danny...

I rolled up off the ground, flinging aside the cover, staggered to the opposite wall and retched and retched and retched...

The police took Liz and me to the hospital. Makka and Trip got to travel with Danny's broken body in the ambulance that had arrived and left before we reached the precinct's backside steps. The panda car driver kept all the windows open and a steady stream of foul language going the whole way there. I fucking stank. Liz kept on trying to explain. "He was laughing and kidding around with us, then he got up. I thought he was going for a slash, but...but he just kept going over the edge."

Over the edge. Danny's edge. Why, Danny, why? Why couldn't you just stay with us? We were a family you didn't have to leave. With us, there would have been no rejection. "My own brother, man...like he never knew me ever..."

Two hospital security men were threatening to remove Trip if he didn't mind his language and just calm down. Liz crossed the A&E reception and stepped between these protagonists, her back to the guards. She placed her hand over Trip's mouth and touched her forehead to his to still him. They remained locked that way as I moved further into the treatment area looking for Makka. I called to him when I saw him, listening to the animated conversation of a green-smocked doctor or nurse. Acknowledging my shout, they both came back to meet me halfway.

The medic turned his attention to me. "As I was trying to explain to your friend here, it is vital that we contact Danny's family at once. Can you help us do that?"

"We're Danny's family," I said, sweeping my arm past Makka and back to Trip and Liz who had followed me out of reception, still holding on to one another for support. The medic turned from me to Makka with a look of frustration. Makka had obviously told him the same thing. He'd hoped to hear something different from me. He didn't, couldn't understand how we had become related. He pressed his palms together as if at prayer and pointed them at me.

"Listen to me," he said. "As the results of his...fall, your friend has sustained massive internal injuries..." He went on, detailing Danny's condition. I felt my concentration slipping away again. His words became overwhelmed by the static in my head. Only occasional phrases rose above the background noise. "...Ruptured kidneys...transplant...donor organ...family." Family. He was talking about Danny's family. "So, I'm telling you, we need to contact his family, his *real* family, or else he will die." He looked at me, imploring me to respond as he asked. The static beat against the inside of my skull, sending waves of pain washing over the whole of my head, penetrating deep into the bone. I found myself unable to remain focused on the medic. My eyes slid past him, my sight blurring from the rush. All I could still make out was the green. The green of the medic's smock. The green of the corridor's walls. The green of my eyes.

When my sight cleared, I was looking at my reflection in the mirrored surface of an examination room window. And my reflection was looking back at me with green eyes. Danny's eyes. Danny's eyes in me. The light of Danny's life in me. I turned to look in turn at Makka, Liz and Trip. I saw Danny's eyes in them too. A ghost of a smile touched our lips. Danny's smile. We said nothing. There was no need. I turned back to the medic and said, quietly, forcefully, each word a certainty, "We are Danny's *real* family. We are his blood." I started to tear at my clothing, baring my chest. "Me, I'm Danny's brother. You can take one of my kidneys. It won't be rejected." The rightness of what I said once again struck at my heart. I had the proof now. It was plain for all to see. The medic could see it. He started back as he looked into my eyes, deep into the green that wasn't there a minute before. I closed the distance once more. "We're Danny's family," I said, drawing him deeper into the green. "We are Danny's family. There'll be no rejection."

The medic could see the light of truth shine back at him through Danny's eyes in me. He finally believed, finally understood... With us as his family, Danny will survive. □



Inside

Sarah J Evans

There is moisture running down my windows as if The Being has spat at me. Though I suspect it is probably rain—it has bubbles in it, maybe bits of food—it looks like saliva. It trickles downwards, making intricate paths like neurons connecting with neurons, their strings carrying pain, carrying pleasure.

Above the house, the sky is a hard grey plate. It could shatter at any moment, hailing sharp stones of hatred. I will wake up and The Being will lie in the garden, or in the road, a jagged triangle of china jutting from its insipid, insistent eye. But that is just wishful thinking. It's there, it lives, it breathes. It is indestructible, like a horrific memory, a torment.

The Being lets the cats live. The pitiful creatures come to my door with bright eyes and empty bellies, pleading for scraps. As if I, starving myself, can feed them. Every week, I take one, though it breaks my heart. I open my door and lift the first one to my face. I watch its eyes—green they are, or blue—full of hope, full of wonder. Outside, the others writhe like a pit of burning snakes. Always they cling to me, trembling, their cold bony bodies feeling what little warmth I exude, purring. One by one, their beautiful eyes will close, and I will pick stringy meat from their bones and make stew from their paws.

The rest continue their nightly pilgrimage beneath my windows, where dim candles shine—a thin gauze of love. They scratch and mewl and purr. They fight each other, fall over each other for my attention. I throw them the carcass of their robbed sibling—it will keep them quiet for a while. All I will hear is their teeth on the bones, and the husky sounds of retching.

But The Being? The Monster? It watches me closely, its one eye at my window, blinking, watering, trying to tell me something, but I don't know what. And now it's spitting at me, covering my house with saliva. I look out from an upstairs window and see a skinny black cat run across the garden, its tail outstretched like a finger, pointing at me.

A man used to visit me, and put his hands on dark corners of my body. He would look at my face with feeling eyes and ask to see. But I would refuse. I would clutch at his sharp hands and plead with him. "You must never ask again. Please, you cannot see, they are ugly, they are shadows, they are Medusa parts. You mustn't see, you mustn't look."

He would ask why, trying to lift my skirt with his furry hands. "Why not? This must be beautiful. Show me it. Show me."

And we would struggle, our fingers interlocking, our limbs striving for mastery, our bodies already weak from lust, colliding and bruising. His nails would scratch my arms and my legs and blood would cross through from my insides, and once those windows were opened, I would gush. All that was inside would pour out without slowing, and I would lay down and dream.

"You mustn't look," I would say. "It will send you mad."

When I awoke, he would be gone, leaving the glistening entrails of a mouse he found under the stairs. Furniture would be upturned where he'd chased the creature, ripping its gut with those sharp nails of his, or his teeth.

Later he would return with wood, with food and with hands that he lay on places I thought I'd forgotten.

But of course he looked, he must have looked at some point, or he wouldn't have gone.

We would lie by the windows and watch the moon shine through. He would be naked and I fully clothed, and we would rock and clutch and he would always try. He would always try to look, always try to see, try to lift up my skirts or my jumper and peer inside to the things I wanted to keep secrets.

It was here that The Being would show suddenly, angrily up at the window, teeth flashing like a tiger's; single eye wide and black and uncontrollable. And I would whimper and snivel, holding his incredible hands away from the seams of my clothes, dodging that look in his eye.

"There's a monster, there's a monster!"

What we had made hard inside me would soften like butter, and his silhouette would not be quite so strange, not quite so alien. He would stand, approaching the window as if it was made of ice and peer out. I would see the whiteness of the moon over the whiteness of his shoulders, the hairs there a fuzzy aura as if gas was escaping through his pores. I would be hiding in the darkest corner of my room, the vision of The Being a dream reel in my mind, flickering like an old-fashioned film.

"There's nothing there, Delia. Nothing there." How did he know my name? When I've never told anybody, how did he know my name? "You told me," he would say. And every time he said I had told him, I remembered: I had never told him.

But he would never see The Being, not in all that time. I would terrify him with my exclamations, exasperate him with my stubbornness. Sometimes, we would dance, but I didn't have any music. We would dance to thin air and sometimes we would laugh. The voice ringing out above the music of our imagination was that of some secret animal within him, or the mimic of my own voice.

"Let me look, Delia. Let me look."

I would tell him that he couldn't, that he would die, or go mad, or turn to stone, and then what would I do? We would continue to dance—like the tails of two cats, I would think—and we would touch, embrace briefly,

caress each other's souls. But he could not see those things clothes were made to hide.

Then, I would look up from his stooped shoulder at The Being through the window. I would see its eye, I would see its teeth, then I would shut my own eyes so I couldn't see anything any more.

He used to bring me pies, and I would pick out the meat and leave the crust for him, which he would stuff into his mouth and swallow noisily. Still hungry, he would scout around for a mouse or a spider. If he caught a mouse, he would smile with triumph.

"Cat's game, this. Not bad, eh?" he would say. I would watch him dissect the little brown creature, pinning open the walls that held the viscera as if he was giving a biology lesson. It would still be alive, and I would shudder as in my head the creature screamed a mouse's scream. "Pie wasn't as good as your mother's," he would say, finally snapping the little head backwards, sniffing with affection, perhaps, at its soft round ears.

"How do you know?" I would say, stepping away from him and The Being at my window. And he would look at me, his head at a slight angle, covering his eyes with a blood-wet hand.

"Oh, Delia," he would say, exhaling loudly and deeply when he said that name.

I'm sure it's rain, or something. It sounds too pretty to be the spattering of saliva. I'm sure it's just weather. Anyway, I can hear the snap of The Being's jaws, the dull gleam and twitch of its eye, the distant, pitiful scratch of its claws on the glass in the rain.

When will it leave me alone? When will it leave me to my mirrored face, the one that smiles when I grimace? And when will that man come back? The one who longed to see my private, lonely places? Is he gone mad? Is he somewhere behind bars, a raving lunatic?

Sometimes, I dream of him—not only of his hands, not only of his curves, or the hardness he put in me, but of his face and of the secrets he told me. I dream of him too, as a statue—that he sees me and turns into stone. All of his dimples, all those soft, dark areas are cold and hard. He stands there still, yet

even more pliant, white and stark. I walk around him, touching briefly what he allowed me to touch in real life, as if I am admiring a piece of art or buying furniture. At last, he can move his eyes. They twinkle in his marble face like rain falling in a puddle.

I dream too, of my mother. She is fat—she always was—and she makes pies from parts of my body. She leans across the table, lops off an ear or my nose and puts it into the pie. Soon, there will be nothing left. Soon, all I will have left is my mind.

Sometimes, I dream with open eyes. Through the strains of, say, my mother's voice, I can hear those cats. Through the smells of my mother's pies, I can smell those cats—where they mark underneath my window—as if it's their territory, not mine. "I've finished you," I hear. "Even your brain, even your entrails, and your toenails. What are we going to eat now?" It's my mother, of course. I can see her, standing over the kitchen table with a knife. She's talking to thin air, looking all around her; looking for me.

"Leave the girl alone." It's a man's voice. Could it be my father? Or just the person I call my father?

Suddenly, my mother's smiling. She's looking down at the flour-covered table in front of her and she's smiling. With a quick feline stab, she impales my eye on the tip of her knife. It was the only part left, it seems, and it rested there tearful and forgotten.

The cats are mewling. My stomach growls. I hear all of it, but I can only see The Being's huge eye pressed against my window. I see its claws, they tap and scratch, making mock grabbing gestures at me. The eye blinks, its lid is grey and scaly like the back of a fish. I see its teeth, they are sharp and pointed, and there, between two of its teeth, something dead is hanging. I lean forward to take a closer look. Even through the glass, I can smell its breath, and the odour of its body. It's a tail. Stuck there, between The Being's teeth, is a tail.

I must fall asleep, or at least I dream—of the man I called father, of the way he used to growl, of the way he used to mimic me, his voice like mine, high and childish. I dream of

watching him in an empty room, on his knees in the dark. A shadow of light falls on his face. I'm standing in the corner—where it is darkest—I'm dangling in the air like a spider, and I am watching. Except I'm frightened—the spider wants to scuttle. He growls first, like a dog when you take away his bone, then he's a cockerel, then he's a cat. I can hear that purring, it fills my ears and my heart and my head. When I open my eyes, the window is broken, and a cat is crawling through the gap. It's purring. Rain is falling, so is darkness. Once the cat is inside, I can feel the cold air that follows. The Being's claws find the hole, stealing into my house. Its grotesque body smells like entrails. A shard of glass drops onto the floor of my room, a frightened tear falls onto the dead cat's fur.

And now he's there, at the window. My face has been buried in the cat's fur, I am racked by guilt and hunger, I am freezing cold and I want to die. But he's here, hammering, getting soaking wet and hammering.

"It's all right, Delia. I'll fix it."

"You came back," I say, but there's something in his face I don't like, a glint, a warning. He has changed. I open the door for him, he shakes his coat and his hat, passing me wood for the fire, and food. I can't help but feel happy. We light the fire and put the pies on the grey plate to warm up.

"I see you've already eaten," he says. I pick up the carcass and toss it onto the fire. When I look back at him, his eyes have narrowed a little as if the bright flame—or something—has hurt them. I ask him where he's been. I ask him why he left me. But all he does is rub his hands in front of the fire before lifting up my skirt. "Let me see. Let me see."

I struggle with him, but his nails tear my flesh, his sharp teeth cut my lips. Outside, The Being saunters up to my window. I can see saliva dripping from his mouth, I can see his claws tapping on the glass, I can hear the cats fighting, I can hear my mother saying, "What are we going to eat now?" and I can hear my father clucking, and flapping his arms up and down as if he's a chicken.

Soon, when he's seen—finally—all I will have left is my mind. Soon, I will be Inside. □

Theseus Rex

Allen Ashley

Poseidon, the god of the sea, was angry with King Minos of Crete. The punishment was, however, inflicted on his wife, Queen Pasiphae. It was ever thus. For her husband's perceived sins the queen was hypnotised into mating with a prize white bull. The unnatural offspring was named Minotaur, a bawling, brutal infant confined to the caverns and expected to find his own lunch almost from day one. Species should stick with species and deities should concern themselves with higher or even deeper things. The semi-bestial bastard understandably soon developed unpalatable habits. The opportunity for quietly disposing of him on some bleak Helvetian hillside passed too quickly. A living, rampant id, he had to be placated.

*

Daedalus we know as a distant ancestor of da Vinci. A grant-assisted scholar, he had early in life become contract bound to King Minos. The monarch allowed him riches and privileges in return for wit and invention, but never freedom. So much for the cradle of Platonic democracy.

Daedalus had long observed the flight of birds and the geometry of motion. He successfully constructed wings for himself and his beloved son Icarus. Airborne hours brought release from the acquisitive tyranny of the Cretan king. Unfortunately, an air traffic controllers dispute on the island's mountainous airport left the younger man circling too high and with too little fuel. He plummeted into the waves leaving only filched albatross feathers and melted gobbets of wax as visible signs of his mortal passing. His distraught father set about his ultimate, vengeful work — a huge stone labyrinth fash-

ioned after the neural pathways of the brain, a self-made prison built with the help of recently liberated pyramid slaves from Egypt.

There was room enough and confusion enough for the Minotaur to be confined within, also.

*

She turned up on my doorstep, eyes red, hair more dishevelled even than my own, breaking the stillness of a Sunday afternoon. I had Fort Knox-ed my heart: there was no going back, our relationship was dead. Cathy, however, was still stuck in its death throes.

"You'd better come in," I suggested.

Her jeans looked slept in. She sat in a chair too close to mine, not touching her coffee but drawing an endless succession of scraggly tissues from the sleeve of her cardigan like a down-at-heel magician. I felt really sorry for her.

"You didn't sleep here last night," she said.

"No, well..." I shrugged.

"You stayed with *her*, didn't you? You spent the night with *her*!"

"It was late. The tubes had finished. You know I can't afford a taxi."

"I knew it! I knew it!" she screamed. Then after tears: "I sat outside in the car all night waiting to see if you'd come back. I kept hoping. I kept waiting."

Hands held. Comforting hugs. Her brown hair against my shoulder. So many times during our stuttering relationship we'd moved from anger and sorrow through physical comfort to the belief that we could stay together another week, another month. But not this time. Sex had to mean more than a pleasurable way of resolving deep divisions.

Her accusations came at me like a battery of mortar shells. I fielded them as best I

could. She demanded gory details I was not prepared to furnish. She wanted the ersatz nourishment of my guilt. She expected us to almost drown in the pool of despond until I rested a hand on her soft thigh or her gentle fingers undid the top buttons of my shirt and we would patch it up like we had too many times before. Her smell, her warmth, her proximity excited me as it always had. Our bodies are our betrayers. But my mind had moved on. This was just something I had to live through. I wouldn't be dragged down again. We had split up. She'd been with someone else, too. I didn't want to be her reserve. We were growing apart and when her tears subsided we would be shipwrecked at opposite ends of the beach.

I offered her every comfort. I was a rock in a storm for her. But I was also a gull or even a cormorant flying above that rock. The worm of cynicism slithered through the labyrinth of my gut. Its slow poison was like a mind-enhancing drug: too much would destroy me but a little could aid clarity.

For what was the real truth in relationships? In marriage? Was it just for regular sex? Procreation? The shared spoils of the hunter and the home-maker? A palliative against loneliness?

I was scared. The commitment was to varying degrees of sado-masochism, a ceaseless power struggle for the next five or forty years. Where have you been? Why aren't you here? Do this for me. You mustn't do that any more or I'll leave you. Give up your freedom. Give in to me. This ring gives me the right to run your life. Love, cherish, honour. Obey. Belong.

It was evening when Cathy left. I hoped she was lucid enough to drive home safely. I'd made some vague promise to contact her but done nothing to really repair the fissure. There was no turning back, no letting go of the slender thread of freedom, no tumbling back into the cavernous prison be I called by a siren or a Eurydice.

I busied myself with the mundanities of the domestic life, an ironic release from the larger considerations.

*

King Aegeus of Athens lost a war with King Minos of Crete. The reparations required him to send a regular supply of seven young vestal virgins to be sacrificed to the misogynistic Minotaur. Many he feasted upon. Others he mated with. Less stupid than history paints him, the bullish beast made sure his genes were passed down to the physical cultures of future generations.

When the monster's tastes turned to young boys, Aegeus decided something had to be done. Else who would pick the olives, pluck the lyre and warm the cockles of an old man by a midnight fire? He persuaded his martial arts trained son Theseus to take on an 007 mission to rid the world of the 'brinth bovine. The libidinous prince resented this distraction from efforts to retain his title at the national fencing championships and surreptitiously build up a storm troop elite for the inevitable palace coup. The voyage and adventure, however, would give him time to think and a higher personal rating on his return to Athens. An early result would be posted by white sails for success, black for failure.

The plan was simple. Theseus was to swallow a sealed condom containing a poison inimical to cattle but harmless to humans. He was very adept at swallowing condoms, semen and the like. And delivering, also.

*

Growing up is merely a losing of role models.

When I was a child I wanted to be Theseus killing the wicked minotaur, even though the man-bull clearly shared my Taurean star sign. In the story book I possessed, the Athenian sailed off with his darling Ariadne into the floating happy ever after. I waved a wooden sword, I growled at tame beasts and out-thought monsters of the dark. When I grew older, I read a different version in which the warrior dumped the maiden not long after she'd helped him escape. I needed new certainties.

Zeus had to disguise himself as a swan in order to seduce the lovely Leda. Besides, he was soon enamoured of Ganymedes, a cup-bearing beautiful boy. Hades kept Perse-

phone by trickery and plea-bargaining. Artemis remained inviolate and Pandora was a woman with a past.

Switching classicisms, the devotion of Romeo and Juliet had only led to a teenage grave.

Pygmalion, the King of Cyprus, fashioned Galatea from stone. Must we *make* rather than search for our other halves?

She didn't ring me. I waited in all day.

*

"Here, take this," she said.

"Er, thank you, but why?" Theseus replied.

Disappointment occluded her dark eyes but only momentarily. One thin shoulder was exposed by her loose white shift. She hitched it up. "Do you not know me? I am the Princess Ariadne, daughter of Minos. I want to save you."

Theseus sucked reflectively at a morsel trapped between two otherwise gleaming teeth. "It's unprincipally to repeat oneself; but why?"

An orientally lowered gaze but a be-ringed European hand briefly gripping his bare thigh as she whispered, "Can you not guess?"

He examined the fruit she'd given him. Was she a disguised Demeter... Persephone... perhaps the twelve tribes' Eve? Maybe it was merely a love delicacy, in which case...

"Do not partake of the pomegranate," she warned. "By morning the encased spiders will be dead but they will have completed their work. Break the fruit open with one blow to the top. Take out the web which will confuse and blind the Minotaur."

He knew the next line. Her lips were soft and boyish, quite the most pleasant thing about her. Kissing was no torture.

"I must go," she muttered, "the guards will have finished their wine by now. Take care, my love."

He watched her shaved legs and pointed feet carry her lithe body away up the stone steps of the dungeon. After she'd gone some of his companions catcalled and whistled from their separate cells.

"Aye!" Theseus shouted back. "Would that she were Ganymedes, eh lads?"

*

After a search lasting several inconsequential lives and spanning the entire tirade of recorded history, a sudden change of fortune means you find her. More importantly, she finds you also. But — fickle flip side of fate — she smokes forty a day, keeps two vicious alsatians and, anyway, her husband won't let her out after dark.

*

You see—now, bear with me a moment—at some stage I wanted to write a more positive piece. I didn't want the flak from a double twist of a tale about men rejecting women. That's not my game. Nor is that *other* game. I wanted to write from the heart. So I split the nucleus of myself and indulged in an auto-conversation. What's with all this downbeat, cynical existentialism? Surely its logical outcome is suicide? You can't just sit there—my fissured self was up on his high horse now—you can't just sit and grumble about things you've lost without considering the joy of adventure and discovery.

Adventure and discovery. We were flying out of Charles de Gaulle airport, both trying to cram into the window seat, the plane executing a steep ascent like a Herculean erection...and there below us the thousands of irregularly shaped cultivated fields in dark green, light green, russet brown and rapeseed yellow a-dazzling the eye like giant crazy paving.

Or the time she unexpectedly came to meet me after I'd had two doses at the dentist's, her care and kindness as my giddy head took me towards lamp-posts and dog-strewn gutters...finding instead her soft white hands and unpainted nails helping me into her car, strapping my seat belt for me and all I wanted to do was sleep or fly or something because the anaesthetic had rendered me unknowing and the traffic was melting the roots of my eyes but oh Cathy soon she had tucked me into her little bed as I contracted to childhood and she was bringing me cold water and needful rest and I should have rejoiced if only I'd been well enough because at that moment I had one who loved and cared for me.

The gazing into eyes. The loving attention.

That becomes an attrition of endless fussing. Are you all right? What did you mean? Why won't you talk to me? Are you sure you're okay? Do you love me? Say you love me. You haven't said it today. You're in a right mood tonight. What do you mean you don't think you love me any more? What's gone wrong with our relationship? We don't do anything any more. Oh, you know what I mean. I can't stand all this silence. Why won't you discuss things? And what's that supposed to mean? I'm sorry, oh I'm really sorry. I want to try again. Do you love me? Say you love me. Again. Again. Again. The ceaseless questions. The ocean of rough for the sinking island of smooth. Just something we have to live through.

*

She was right. In the morning when he broke open the pomegranate the spiders were mere specks but their handiwork filled the sphere. He tucked the web into the belt of his loin cloth. The enemy soldiers pushed and prodded him forward for the first fifteen minutes or so. Then it was, "All right, son, you can make your own way from here!" That had been apparent miles ago. Even in victory he was unlikely to find the exit before thirst or hunger claimed him.

Wall torches provided just enough occasional illumination. Bones fractured the light in dusty corners. One skeleton still clutched a somewhat rusty sword. It would have to do.

"Fe fi fo fum, I smell the blood of an Athenian..."

Theseus could hear the carnivorous bastard snorting and anticipating ahead of him. Was it one more corner or three? The adrenaline of impending battle was delicious... if only it wasn't so very likely terminal.

A stench of dung hit him before he saw the russet hair, the lowering brow and the obscenely phallic horns. He reached for the supposedly blinding web but the gossamer had snagged at some point on the rough edges of the labyrinth walls and proceeded to unravel inevitably.

"What a pain in the neck," Theseus mumbled.

And then he had a sudden idea...

*

I was anxiously watching the clock because Cathy was already twenty minutes late, although I had no wish or concentration to usefully fill this time without her. She rang. She said her parents were using the car so she'd be walking round. I'll meet you, I said. I'll be all right, she said. It's raining, I saw. Meaningful action would quell the habitual butterflies. A black umbrella, black coat, white training shoes; but the soft rain was golden in the street light.

There were a couple of side turnings she might have taken as a variation so I stopped under the railway bridge, effectively halfway between us. I kept my umbrella up, singing some pop song not entirely sub-vocally. The sweet shop was boarded up, the bed shop tucked in for the night. I remembered the former premises as a greengrocer's. I'd bought a Christmas tree there many years ago.

Three teenage girls passed me, their pub disco clothes a poor protection against the dissolving sky. A train rumbled overhead, the only thunder of the April evening. Somebody was walking a recalcitrant dog. I remained in light, assuring everybody that I was not a mugger by the back light of my sodium halo.

She was on the other side of the street, a dark figure moving into nocturnal focus. The droplets glittered in her hair like a spray of Egyptian jewels. Her smile was short lived, even self-conscious. I resisted the urge to run towards her. I stood casually still, letting the resonance of the moment permeate me like the echoes of a passing train. She was a Grecian priestess leaving the crumbling temple to begin a life with me wherein the spiritual heights would be reached not by self-denial but by the shared passion of the natural union of a man and a woman. She was three steps away. My arms were extended.

Hi.

Hi.

*

We think Theseus disposed of his troublesome fishwife Ariadne by feeding her to the

fishes just off Naxos. Some suggest he landed her on a desert islet at low tide, others that he gave her leave to enter a temple on Kafos and stay there with several other unwanted hillside princesses. This last is perhaps being too kind to a single-minded prince in a heterophobic society.

He insisted the sails be kept black. The look-out watched the grieving King Aegeus throw himself off the cliff into the sea that would bear both his name and his body. For the deceitful Theseus it was the easiest palace coup in history.

The prince had killed his father but not in order to bed his mother, unlike his distant cousin Oedipus. Theseus, in fact, put aside some of his boyish ways and married Hippolyte, Queen of the Amazons, a body-builder from the East Rhineland who was the first mortal to undergo a successful sex-change without the aid of surgery. Together they coached the Hippolyte Youth and dominated both track and field events at the Ancient Olympics for the next twelve years. Some called it a golden age.

*

There is no image that adequately fits. Hurdles... rungs of a ladder... a succession of stepping stones. All the things you're expected to achieve at every stage of your life, the dully gleaming combat medals of masculine progression: laddishness, leglessness, lost virginity, money, education, qualifications, a career, a car, a house, a wife, kids, better car, better house, better wife?...

The choices and compromises forced on the bulls of the herd. The apparent failure of not marrying or not having children or refusing to submit to the penile fray of puerile expectations. When did we lose the right to decide? When did we ever have it?

The shame of being single. The sly looks and the innuendo.

The love of women. A woman. Someone special. The craving for a companionship that is not stifling. To reach the hearth at the centre of the cave or the eternal flame in the midst of the labyrinth... and know that you can't compromise so much, so self-denying much.

And nor can she.

If she still lives there.

I want the nest, not the web.

But there is always too much history against us.

The dear relations, the un-consulted therapists, the unerring oracle and the elders of the tribe would all agree: this was just something I had to live through.

My whole life... just something I had to live through.

○ **Allen Ashley** has been widely published in magazines and a couple of anthologies. His interests include music, football, and short stories. One of his ambitions, to have a collection published, is to be realised. Coming soon from TTA Press: Allen Ashley rewrites the solar system in *The Planet Suite*.

○ **Joel Lane** (see *Windows of Flesh* on page 10) lives in Birmingham and works in educational publishing. His stories and poems have appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies, and a collection of his short stories, *The Earth Wire*, was published by Egerton Press in 1994.

○ The one-time kickin' guitarist of obscure protopunk band 'The Abbatoir of Love', **Sam Ravenscraft** (see *Waiting for the Wireman...* on page 13) lives in Sheffield and doesn't know what 'slipstream' is—maybe it just hasn't reached South Yorkshire yet. Fairly new to writing, Sam is currently working on his first novel, provisionally titled *Vampire Kitchen*. When it comes to influences, he would most like to be Ian McDonald, Maria McKee, Mary Shelley, Mark Twain, or whoever wins the National Lottery this week.

○ Prior to *Danny's Family* (see page 18) **Hick Turnball** has had poetry and short fiction published in the 1994 and 1995 Oxford & Cambridge May Anthologies, *Orbis*, *Xenos* and *Substance*. We have more fiction from him forthcoming in TTA. He is currently doing Post-Doctoral research (under a pseudonym) in the Department of Chemistry of King's College London.



Blue Nothings

Simon Avery

Later, when the sun had gone, Lily would tell Michael how she had intended it to be different with Stephen; she'd imagined that changing would be easy.

"But you can't escape who you are. Not in the long run," she said. "When I met Stephen I knew he wouldn't understand how I lived, but for a while I suppose I really needed him. Or just someone. God knows what I was thinking. There's only so many times you can wake up in the morning with a smile on your face. I've been on my own too long to do that."

Lily shook her head after a moment. "One night I remembered when I was six: I got caught climbing over the neighbour's fence for some reason, and he staggered out in his vest and trousers, shouting, 'Bugger off you little cow!' and I fell off the fence and broke my arm. Do you remember? I was in plaster for months. 'Arse over tip' Dad kept saying when we drove home from the hospital. It made me laugh. 'Arse over tip. Arse over tip!'"

"And then I remembered listening to Mum crying at night while we were in bed, and then the next morning she'd be fine, smiling in her blue dressing gown but Dad had gone to work early without speaking to anyone.

"That's what you can't escape, Michael. It's yourself in the end that catches up: all the photos of your life, all the beds you've slept in, all the money you've paid. I suppose I realised that years ago, but sometimes you forget and think you can make a go of it. With Stephen I couldn't stand the lack of privacy. He must have felt short-changed. We shouldn't have moved in together. He said he liked the shop model of me rather than the one he got to take home."

Lily smiled. "So I told him to fuck off."

She had tried to forget the family, put a distance between them and herself so she could have some kind of identity. Michael hadn't really begrudged her that. He had followed her lead and left home to live with Sharon in Wales two months later. It was only by chance—or desperation fuelled by loneliness, he suspected—that Lily had discovered his phone number on the base of a Polaroid he had sent her two years previously, when he had known where she lived.

In it he and Sharon were beneath the archway of the church where they had been wed. Sharon had pushed her arms around him, both of them braced against a wind that smelled of the nearby industrial estates, and the sea. Michael was pulling his coat around Sharon and shouting something to the photographer, his mouth like a black hole in his face. At its base he had written 'Married! I must be mad!' and his phone number. They had better photos but they had all been clipped into an album and placed into a drawer in the bedroom. They made Michael cringe but Sharon took them out occasionally when she was feeling sentimental or apathetic.

They had been married in Cardiff, where Sharon's family hailed from. The guests had all belonged to her side of the family apart from Chris, Michael's best man, whom he hadn't heard from since. Michael had received a card from his mother, wishing him well, but saying his father had refused to drive all the way to South Wales. Michael had felt faintly relieved at that. He hadn't heard anything from Lily.

"Hello Michael?" The years and a hundred or more miles had made strangers of them both. Lily's voice had sounded hollow, yet unnervingly close, as if she were in the same

room. He caught little of what she had said: a flat in a village, a boyfriend who had left her. When she was down to her last ten pence, he told her to hang up then reverse the charges but she refused. "Say you'll come down and visit me, Michael. Please."

With the absence of an excuse and the time to invent one, he said yes. He could see Sharon from the hallway in her baggy sweat-shirt, with her feet up, watching the television. She had looked at him and frowned. He told Lily he would drive down the following Saturday. She tried to give him directions and he attempted to scribble them down, but they looked like gibberish. "Just give me the address, Lily," he said. He was still writing when the money ran out.

In the end he found the village without much fuss. Lily was living in a small furnished flat above its only shop.

Michael had only spent a couple of hours on the road after leaving early in the morning. Sharon had risen with him and paced around like a sleepwalker as he jumped in and out of the shower, and then down to the kitchen. She sipped at tea in a silk kimono that her aunt had bought her from somewhere in the east. He'd looked at her thighs absently as she stifled yawns with her fist.

"I'll try and get home tonight," he felt obliged to say.

Sharon shrugged and emptied the tea down the sink. "I'm going back to bed," she said. When she paused to kiss him, all he could smell was the baby.

"It's nice to talk to someone," Lily said. "Sometimes I can go whole days without saying a word now Stephen's not here. If it occurs to me, late at night, I'll just say something aloud to make sure my voice hasn't gone." She had her hands clasped between her knees. To the floor, she said, "Do you think that sounds pathetic?"

Michael placed a palm on her back as she nervously fumbled with a Lipsyl and ran it over her cracked lips. When she took his hands, it was to stop hers from shaking. "It's nice to see you, Michael. Really it is."

He hadn't expected to find Lily so thin and vulnerable. The last time he had seen her she had still been an adolescent with puppy fat and clouds of acne around her chin. Now her paleness was alarming. She had tied her hair up; wisps of it hung around her face like watercolour flourishes, and it was dyed a shocking, livid red. But her face and nature was apologetic: Michael couldn't imagine Lily doing such a thing out of rebellion, however conservative her surroundings were.

"I've been watching the sun come in," Lily said. "It's the first time it's felt warm since Spring started. Look, outside you can see the daffodils, and blossoms on the trees."

Michael imagined her moving restlessly around the front room, the way people did when anticipating visitors; pulling at her long, out of shape pullover which she'd probably bought from a charity shop somewhere. Although she'd called him here, Lily hadn't gone to any pains to make the flat presentable. Perhaps, Michael thought, she had done so purposely to illuminate how she wasn't coping, but somehow that didn't concur with her personality. She simply seemed preoccupied; as if she started things and forgot about them. Consequently the flat was dismal and cheerless, and full of stale aroma: an amalgamation of take-away meals and too many unopened windows. The walls were furred with the shadows of people who'd scuffed against them too many times. The sofa in the front room felt stiff with cold despite the sunlight, the throw-rug across it frayed and musty-smelling.

Outside, the sky kept breaking its pale shell and letting in the sun. Released, it showered across the yews and elms, sycamores and ferns, and the coarse, tangled grass that grew around the gravestones in the churchyard. As a stray breeze caught the tall oaks, birds tumbled from the branches and circled the village; came to rest on the church's weather vane.

A bunch of cyclists had downed their bikes and were shuffling noisily into the pub for an early lunch, peeling off their woollen hats and waterproofs as they went.

The sun drew back again and took with it the colour from the hanging baskets outside

the three-storey Georgian terraces opposite; the shadows from the white cottages on the narrow lanes out of the village. Even two cats on a windowsill nearby seemed roused from their lethargy and scratched at doors to be let in.

With the sun gone, Lily turned back to the flat's stillness, and the mood changed tangibly. Michael tried to draw her out with talk of the flat, the village and work, but after a while she seemed weighted down, unable to speak. When Michael asked about Stephen, she rushed out the words as if they'd been planned, pondered on. Michael was relieved to hear that although he'd gone, he had promised to pay his share of the rent until the lease expired. Michael was glad he had been scrupulous enough to not leave Lily hanging. She'd never have afforded it otherwise: she'd be homeless now if he hadn't made the gesture.

Michael had produced a photograph of Sharon and the baby. "We've called her Nina," he said, pressing it into Lily's hand. She stared vacantly at it. "She's beautiful," Michael said. "But we're half asleep most of the time, what with the feeding and the nappies. Sharon gets a bit upset at times but I suppose it's only natural."

Lily nodded, abstracted. Michael thought about the smell of milk clinging to his clothes, the kitchen cluttered with nappies and sterilising equipment. Sharon's mother had bought them some terry towelling nappies to save money, rather than buying disposables. Michael's fingers had grown coarse with too many immersions in bleach, and sore with safety-pin pricks. Every day of late had felt like the atmosphere in Lily's flat: full of pale light and static.

He'd risen only this morning when it was still dark to coerce Nina back to sleep. Sharon had watched him walking back and forth with her for a while until she had sat up and complained, "You're not holding her right. *Christ*, give her here," she'd said, getting up. "*Bloody hell*." Michael had gone downstairs and made tea that neither of them drank and then fallen into another fitful sleep.

He'd become a somnambulist at work. He realised he'd been waiting for life to return to normal and castigated himself. Sharon had been forced to work part time now, and Michael expected that she would grow resentful because of that but she'd just grown apathetic and distantly angry, which somehow seemed worse.

Lily said, "Life gets to you in the end, Michael," and rose to make them tea. "It's a long journey from Wales isn't it? Do you want something to eat?"

Later they visited the village pub, which made Michael feel uncomfortable for reasons he couldn't explain. He hadn't had alcohol since the baby had arrived.

The cyclists were drunk by now. They smelled of sweat; its sour odour filled the small bar room. They roared loudly at each others' jokes and made smutty remarks at the young barmaid.

Michael ordered drinks and two cheap meals. When they arrived, Lily pushed her food around. Michael resisted the temptation to enquire if she was eating enough. He sipped at his pint. It lingered sourly in his mouth. That, and the smoke in the air made his head feel heavy.

The pub conversations were enough to drown out any of their own, but Lily wasn't trying. Michael wondered if she regretted inviting him down: perhaps she had hoped he'd changed and hadn't or, worse still, too much.

"How's about another then?" one of the cyclists shouted.

"Go an' check the bikes. See if they're still there."

"Who's gonna fuckin' nick 'em round 'ere?"

"Hey, less of the language you..."

Michael shook his head and watched his meal go cold. It took a moment for him to realise that Lily had started speaking. "Sorry, what?"

"The lakes," she said, glancing at the cyclists. "I like going to the lakes. I often spend a day there in Earlswood, in a small rowing boat. There's an old man who lives

around there. He lets me use it. Fishermen have finished by the time I get there. All the serious ones anyway; they always start early in the morning when it's still dark. It's terribly comforting," she said, with an air of sententiousness. "I love the silence. And the isolation. I feel like I'm myself there, just sat in the middle of the lake with the sound of the boat creaking and the water lapping. I don't have to be anything there; no giving or taking." She smiled faintly. "There's something very pure about it all."

Michael looked at her eyes but there still seemed to be more hollow than substance in them. "What do you want me to do, Lily?" he asked, exasperated finally. "Shall I talk to the estate agents about the flat? Is it Stephen? Or money? Is it money?"

Lily sighed angrily. She stood up suddenly. The chair fell backwards and clattered to the floor. The fracas caused the cyclists to pause for a moment, then sly smiles curled across their lips. Michael rose, trying not to redden. Lily stumbled past him, and out of the pub. Awkwardly he followed her. Once outside he could hear the cyclists roaring with laughter again.

The cool air of the early evening calmed him. Lily had made her way back to the flat. Michael felt his patience exasperated. If Lily hadn't needed him for any kind of help, then why on earth was he here? He sighed and made his way across the green to the public phone box, wedged between two cottages. Sharon answered on the fifth ring.

"Sharon, it's me."

She grunted. He could hear Nina crying faintly in the background. "I'm going to stay with Lily tonight. She's...I don't know. There's something wrong. I suppose I'll have to find out what. I'll leave first thing in the morning."

Sharon sighed. "I'll phone Mum. She'll come and stay the night."

"I'm sorry, love. Look, kiss Nina for me. I'll see you tomorrow," he said, as warmly as possible. Sharon grunted again and put the phone down.

Lily had left the front door half open. Once inside Michael closed and locked

it, and pushed himself up the stairs. "Lily?" he called into the dismal light on the landing. She wasn't in the front room. He stepped inside and switched on the electric fire. The smell of burning dust rose into the air, suggesting disuse. Michael wondered how she'd coped during the winter. He warmed his hands, then wandered back out onto the landing.

"Lily?" he said, and heard her in the bathroom, groaning or crying.

She had left the door ajar. Michael paused awkwardly on the threshold, then stepped over. Surely Lily would have locked the door if she had desired privacy. Perhaps she wanted him to show some control or order.

When he saw her on the edge of the bath and saw the blood she'd caused, he couldn't stop himself from clumsily stumbling towards her with a towel from a nearby rack. She was bent over with a razor in her wet hand. She had made cuts in her left arm and belly, and was contemplating them with a faint, obdurate sadness. Even when Michael fumbled with the towel and pressed it finally onto her skin, she refused to look at him. Michael tried to stop shaking.

"What is this going to achieve?"

Lily rested her head against his shoulder. His closeness started her crying. "It's just a temporary solution, Michael," she sighed. "Sometimes there isn't anything of *me*." When she pulled herself to her feet, Michael tried to restrain her. "They don't hurt much," she said. "The bleeding will stop soon. It's just a release." The towel was bright red but the cuts weren't deep. As she dabbed at them, Michael noticed the other, faint scars across her arms which she'd kept concealed until now. Before he could say anything, Lily was leading him back into the living room with a sudden urgency. She took him to the window.

The village had fallen into dusk. As Michael's breath began to mist the window, Lily pointed down to two figures who were moving jerkily beneath the streetlamp in front of the flat. Michael pressed his face closer to the glass. "What are they?"

"They're me, Michael," Lily said, "and to a lesser extent, they're you."

The colour of a pale blue gas flame, they were hunchbacks or cripples, or both; their limbs atrophied, their bellies swollen. They were shivering in the twilight; almost dancing.

Michael gripped the window ledge to stop himself from shaking. Something about the figures made him feel like a raw, stripped nerve.

"Look," Lily said and raised her arm. Without hesitation, one of the blue figures below lifted an arm. When Lily embraced Michael, he watched wearily over her shoulder as they mimicked that too. The pale blue limbs entwined made Michael think of victims of a disease, wasting away in each other's arms. One of them peered up at the window. Michael jerked away but something about the aimlessness of the figure's gaze suggested blindness. Its eyes were empty and vague.

"There's more of you," Lily said. "It couldn't hurt for you to give them some too."

Michael shook his head, unsure of what Lily was suggesting. He backed away from the window. The fire suddenly couldn't warm him; the room was too full of darkness and threat.

"They have lives too, Michael," Lily went on. "You just can't understand how they'd live. Like me. You'd be surprised," she said. "Sometimes they're stronger than me. When I'm feeling empty, like nothing, they'll come in and touch me, even though I'm being perfectly still."

Michael tried to push away the thought of them shuffling up the staircase and then stumbling across the bedroom to press their crippled fingers into his sister, their cold, dry lips on hers, their brittle ribs scraping against the scars on her belly.

Lily saw the horror on Michael's face. A look of implacability crossed hers. She dabbed at the cuts on her arm and said, "I shouldn't have asked you to come. You can't help anyone can you?"

Michael couldn't tell if it was an accusation or if it was pity.

He woke in the night to find Lily lying beside him.

While she had made the sofa bed up earlier, he had considered phoning a doctor but he couldn't clear his head enough. An uncomfortable silence had taken over, which Michael had found at once embarrassing and infuriating. He tried to speak but found he hadn't anything to say. The weight of the day had suddenly taken its toll on him, for he felt so tired he couldn't move.

In the darkness he could feel Lily's weight near his side, wrapped in the tangled sheets. She had taken his hand and was rubbing it to warm herself. When he languidly reached round for her, she pulled away. Michael sighed and closed his eyes again. He hadn't the energy to work things out now. It could wait until morning.

His dreams had more stamina. In them, he was still awake and Lily was closing her mouth around his penis until it grew hard. He was appalled and aroused in equal measure. The warmth and wetness of her mouth and tongue dulled his limbs into inaction. He groaned as she worked him up to a climax. When he came, it was prolonged and grueling; an orgasm that lasted for minutes, draining him of every fluid he had.

When he woke afterwards, Lily was fumbling her way out of his arms and off the sofa bed. Michael registered dully that there was semen in his pubic hair and across his thighs. He tensed in the gloom. Suddenly he wondered if he was still dreaming or, worse, if he hadn't slept at all.

Lily was leaving the room. As Michael's eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, he saw her pause at the door, and then he realised it wasn't his sister at all. The pale blue figure scratched blindly at the door and then stumbled out of the room.

"Christ," Michael heard himself repeating raggedly. He tried to struggle to his feet but as he rose he felt all the blood leave his head. His lethargy felt like lead, filling up his body. The door was suddenly an eternity away. He fell back down and closed his eyes on the spinning room.

In the morning, when Michael woke, Lily was gone.

He didn't know how to feel. The water in the shower wasn't warm enough; he shivered as he dried himself, avoiding the bloodied towel from the previous night, which floated in the sink. The water was as red as Lily's hair.

There was no milk so he made himself a black coffee, which only scalded his tongue. The kitchen was dismal: full of unwashed crockery, unemptied bins and out of date food. The morning had made everything seem suddenly focused, like a video image, which only suggested how close things were to breaking. For a moment he felt relieved at Lily's absence.

Michael knew where she would be, but he had no idea how to face her now. He couldn't help thinking that he'd missed the chance to help her, except he couldn't believe he had anything to offer that would be of any use.

It was a short drive to the lakes. A single, narrow lane bisected the water. Tall grey trees rose around the perimeter for as far as the eye could see. Michael parked near the water's edge and got out. The day was pale with light, the sky full of bruised, uncertain clouds. The noise of traffic had faded; the soft ebbing sound of water engulfed it. He fastened his coat against the cold breeze: the air here was as fresh as it was by the sea.

Lily was in a boat in the middle of the lake, the oars like useless limbs on either side. She seemed to be staring into the distance, as if trying to catch sight of something. Gulls floated soundlessly around her, across the small steeples of green waves, softly skimming them with their wings.

Michael's fingers had grown numb with cold. He pushed his hands into his pockets and wondered if there was really any reason to wait for her now. He remembered what she had said about not escaping your own life: the faces in the photos, the beds you'd slept in, the money you'd paid, and wondered if she wasn't simply giving it all away. Whatever she had made had now grown tangible, real, and they were taking for themselves. Perhaps everyone was always in that balance: giving and taking, and leaving themselves open to that abuse. Perhaps some people gave too

much and lost themselves in the process. Michael wondered what he had given last night, and to whom.

Two fishermen strolled past Michael and the car, one loaded down with creel and rods, the other with a crippled leg and crutches. They were discussing the day's potential. Both were uncombed and wearing shabby, paint-stricken jeans that they'd probably decorated their front rooms in, their green cagoules flapping in the breeze. They looked like two youths, despite their wedding rings and thick glasses.

Michael glanced at Lily again, then climbed back inside the car and drove away.

Afterwards, he often imagined the blue figures returning to Lily, gathering at the door, gazing up at the windows with vacant stares, their skinny limbs suggesting movements Lily hadn't instigated. But perhaps, he thought, they had all the strength they needed and inevitably, they would leave then. Perhaps they had already gone to live their newfound lives, haunting other windows, or scurrying away down the little winding country lanes. He had no idea how they would live. Who was he to say what a life was?

"Imagine their eyes caught in the sudden glow of headlights," he would say to Sharon later, and she would simply look at him with barely concealed intolerance. *For a moment the eyes would be empty and blind, he thought, but staring all the same.*

○ *Simon Avery lives in Birmingham and has only been writing seriously for about a year or so. **Blue Nothings** is the first story he's had published, and was written with the aid of Nick Drake and Scott Walker (on the stereo, not literally).*

○ *Roddy Williams is this issue's featured artist (see the front cover, pages 12, 23, 32, 43 and 54). His artwork has been featured in numerous publications in the UK and abroad, and he occasionally turns his hand to fiction too.*

FUTURE PERFECT: A PLEA FOR MASS ILLUSION

Bruce Boston

Welcome your painful sorrow to a bright tomorrow
where all modes of strangeness have been banished,
where the crumbling infrastructures are beautiful,
the glowering masses are hologenically beautiful,
where even the daily terrors that scream across
the airwaves and sanguinely stain the headlines
are abstracts for rants of beautiful interpretation.

Somnambulating in a staid river of racing light,
chromatic evasions rapidly discharging across
our saturated retinas, our rendered imaginations,
we can savor all of our pleasures by the screenful,
famous brand pleasures we have learned to trust:
tamper proof, free of fat, one-third fewer neurons,
digitally remastered from their hairy antecedents.

Once we collapse the tenements of hateful passion
and detonate the circuitous tunnels of the heart
into a flat darkness no citizen need ever traverse,
once we buckle our belts and blindside history,
once we garrote the nanosecond with fiber optics,
utopia is a state of conscience we might all inhabit.
Every one of us can be taught to maintain fashion.

So surrender your strangeness to a bright tomorrow
where painful sorrow is barely a chatter in the static,
where beauty travels from the mind of the controller.
Rush past the cracked palm, shun the jaundiced eye,
leave your thought and reservations on the doorstep.
Sit close by our silkclad sides and tell us you love us.
Come and kiss the strawberry blisters from our lips.

*Bruce Boston is the winner of a multitude of poetry awards. His poetry & fiction has appeared in hundreds of magazines, anthologies and collections; his most recent book is the brilliant novel **Stained Glass Rain**, available in the UK from Cold Tonnage Books, 136 New Road, Redfont, Feltham, Middlesex, TW14 8HT. Bruce lives in California, USA.*

Feel the Spin

Mark McLaughlin

Dear Diary,

Philippe told me today that his parents were a space monkey and a dollop of cosmic ooze. If he has to make up a personal history, he could at least give it a little more glamour. Philippe is luxuriously handsome. His skin is so creamy and golden and his ice-blue eyes are so piercing. No doubt his parents are gorgeous jet-trash transsexuals.

I am dizzy with love and sometimes, I cannot contain myself. This morning, we drank mimosas by the hotel pool, lounging and sunning and chatting. Philippe fed Dunsott dozens of cucumber sandwiches—no wonder the poor thing is so fat. Every now and then some young lovely would stop and sit with Philippe and I must confess, I felt a bit jealous. I'm afraid my sharp tongue drove most of his admirers away.

Speaking of admirers, a blue-haired old woman recognised me in the lobby and asked for my autograph.

After lunch (sushi), we drove down to *De Brou Productions*, where we watched the shooting of a porn video. Of course, Philippe had to bring Dunsott, but at least he didn't bark. Philippe owns the studio, so everyone treated him like a god. Which he is. Was he born filthy rich? Perhaps he's the son of a politician, or an oil billionaire.

When we returned to the hotel, a hysterical, heavyset woman was screaming at two police officers in the gift shop. Sharkey, the desk clerk, told us that somebody had snatched her baby from its carriage.

I can still see the shining flesh of Philippe's video troupe, slick with spermicides, assorted lubricants and mutual juices! The entire studio had the delicious coffee-reek of sex.

It pains me to think of Philippe tangling with any of them. Jealousy is such a childish, petty emotion.

Dear Great American Novel,

I can't get enough of Philippe's tigerish body. After a leisurely morning of love-making, he asked (jokingly?) if he should join the cast of the video. I'm sure he already has, off-camera. I was showering at the time, so I pretended not to hear him.

I wouldn't want him to think me prudish... I might ask if I can bring Sharkey to our bed. He flirts incessantly with us, but his teeth are so crooked. No competition there.

Philippe and I drove down to the studio again. There are at least a dozen performers in the video (an ambitious production). I noticed dozens of small blue tubes scattered about the studio. I opened one of the tubes and squeezed out a little of its contents—a yellowish-white cream that turned to golden oil when I rubbed it between my fingers. Some sort of lubricant. None of the performers were using it; the slickum du joir was butter. I slipped three tubes in my pocket while no one was watching.

We ran on the beach this afternoon. Even though Dunsott is as wide as he is long, he was able to keep up with us. I should get a pet of my own... It would have to get along with Dunsott. Philippe takes the dog everywhere.

Dear Spicy Paperback,

Sharkey rubbed against me by the pool. He has a wonderfully sinewy body. His teeth really aren't so bad—they give him character. A feral quality. He said that when he was in college, he used to watch me on *Passion for Tomorrow* and dream about making love

with me — or rather, with that impetuous-young-law-student-struggling-to-uncover-his-family's-dark-secret, Biff Richards. Shall I make his fantasy come true? If I did, I'd even put on my Biff jacket—the one with the leather patches on the elbows.

What a monster I am: one minute, declaring my love for Philippe—the next, contemplating Sharkey's navel.

Dear Pulp Thriller,

I was going to use some of the lubricant from the blue tube, but Philippe stopped me. He even took the tube away from me and wouldn't say why. I didn't bother to mention that I had more.

Later, he loaded Dunsott in the car and went to the studio without asking if I wanted to come along. I found one of my other blue tubes and called up room service à la Sharkey.

The golden lubricant must contain some sort of hallucinogenic. Sharkey turned into a hairless, noseless thing with silver skin and eyes like a jungle cat. A pattern of cobalt-blue splotches sprang up on my own flesh. Our reflection in the dresser mirror was perfectly normal. Both of us were screaming and laughing like devils. There was another sound, too—a shrill squeaking. I have no idea where that came from.

The entire mindfuck lasted about twenty minutes. Later, Sharkey told me that my eyes had turned into pools of black ink. We soon realised that we had experienced the same hallucination. Is that possible?

Why didn't Philippe want me to find out about the drugged slickum? I can only assume he's saving it for a special occasion.

Dear Science Fiction Epic,

Philippe went to the studio again without inviting me. I think he's afraid I'll steal a blue tube. While he was gone, Sharkey and I did the nasty again—and the lubricant made it very nasty indeed.

Like before, I was spotted with blue and Sharkey was silver-skinned. We found ourselves making love in a moonlit rain-forest. Black caterpillars the size of my thumb crawled on our steaming bodies. The sky was

filled with giant insects and shrieking albino bats. A large, fish-scaled rat with human hands squeaked in the branches overhead.

My orgasm lasted for at least three minutes.

After Sharkey left, I ordered up dinner (steak) and took a nap. When I awoke, I put a little of the cream on my hand and began to fool with my tool. Soon I was transported back to the rain-forest, where the rat climbed on my shoulder and smiled a mouthful of silver-needle teeth at me. "I love the smell of baby-fat," it said.

It wanted to know where I got the lubricant, so I told it all about Philippe.

It cocked its little head to one side. Then it shrilled "de Brou!" and began to laugh.

The rat, whose name is Iaak, claims that Philippe is over 350 years old, and that he is the son of Father Urbain Grandier, who was burned alive in 1634 for the bedevilment of the nuns of Loudon. Philippe's mother was a young penitent, Madeleine de Brou. Iaak had served an accomplice of Father Grandier—a cleft-lipped old woman who had been betrayed by the priest and burned as well.

The rat also told me about the cream: it contains juice of aconite, cinquefoil, nightshade, and soot in a baby-fat base.

I can't believe I'm quoting a hallucination. And a rat at that.

That night, Philippe and I ran on the beach again with Dunsott. I had to rest several times—the stars seemed to whirl overhead.

Dear Forbidden Tome,

A thousand pardons for ignoring you for an entire week.

Sharkey and I have made five visits to the rain-forest. I have gone by myself seven times.

In my visions, Iaak has taken me beyond the rain-forest to other realms of splendor. I have looked upon living geometric configurations of crystal floating through the primal mists of a young planet. I have walked among metal children with glowing needles for fingers, who must pleasure/shred the exposed brain of the giant leech that is their master. I have soared on the back of a horrid

winged mollusc through skies alive with veined, pulsing clouds.

It is hard to return to normal life after such visions. The drugged lubricant has sharpened my senses. I now can detect the yeasty whiff of Dunsott's genitalia from across the room. When a bird flies by, I smell the ammonia tang of its faeces-streaked tail. During meals, I taste the bacteria on my food. I can feel the mites and other minute life-forms that crawl on my flesh.

Sex with Philippe or Sharkey is like an act of exquisite torture. The greasy rumble of their intestines squirming in their abdomens thunders in my ears. At night, I can see the rings of Saturn without a telescope. I constantly feel a strange spinning sensation.

Iaak has explained the nature of Philippe's power. The witch-hunters may have burned Urbain Grandier alive, but they pulled his carcass from the fire too soon. The magick had its own heart, and this had not been destroyed. In time, Grandier might have returned to life; too bad for him that his son had been told where he was buried. Philippe dug up the pauper grave of his father and made the magick his own—by swallowing it.

How many companions has Philippe had? Dozens? Hundreds? His ice-blue eyes have seen his aged lovers lowered into the ground. His skin is creamy from the fat of countless little ones... I'd like to think it's all a deliciously wicked fantasy: reality would require too much thought.

But still—one dozen performers in the video, with Philippe as mentor...

Iaak has told me what must be said and done. My first task is to mix the baby-fat mixture into a jar of Philippe's lubricant of preference. Then, we shall see what we shall see.

Dear Book of the Dead,

The rat was right.

The Sabbat ointment revealed Philippe's true form to me. My lover was a covenant master of great power: a horned satyr with the eyes of a blowfly and the beak of a vulture. Philippe was enraged, and would

have torn me apart with his hooked claws had not Iaak whipped him across the eyes with a thick black vine slathered with snake venom. As I screamed the Scarlet Words, the rat ripped open Philippe's belly with its teeth. I tore out and ate Philippe's liver, and a surge of power coursed through my body.

When I returned to this world, Iaak materialised as my familiar in the form of a white ferret. It found Dunsott cowering behind the toilet and ripped the little butterball's throat open.

I can't say I am sad Philippe is gone. Tomorrow I shall go to the studio and declare my mastery to the Twelve.

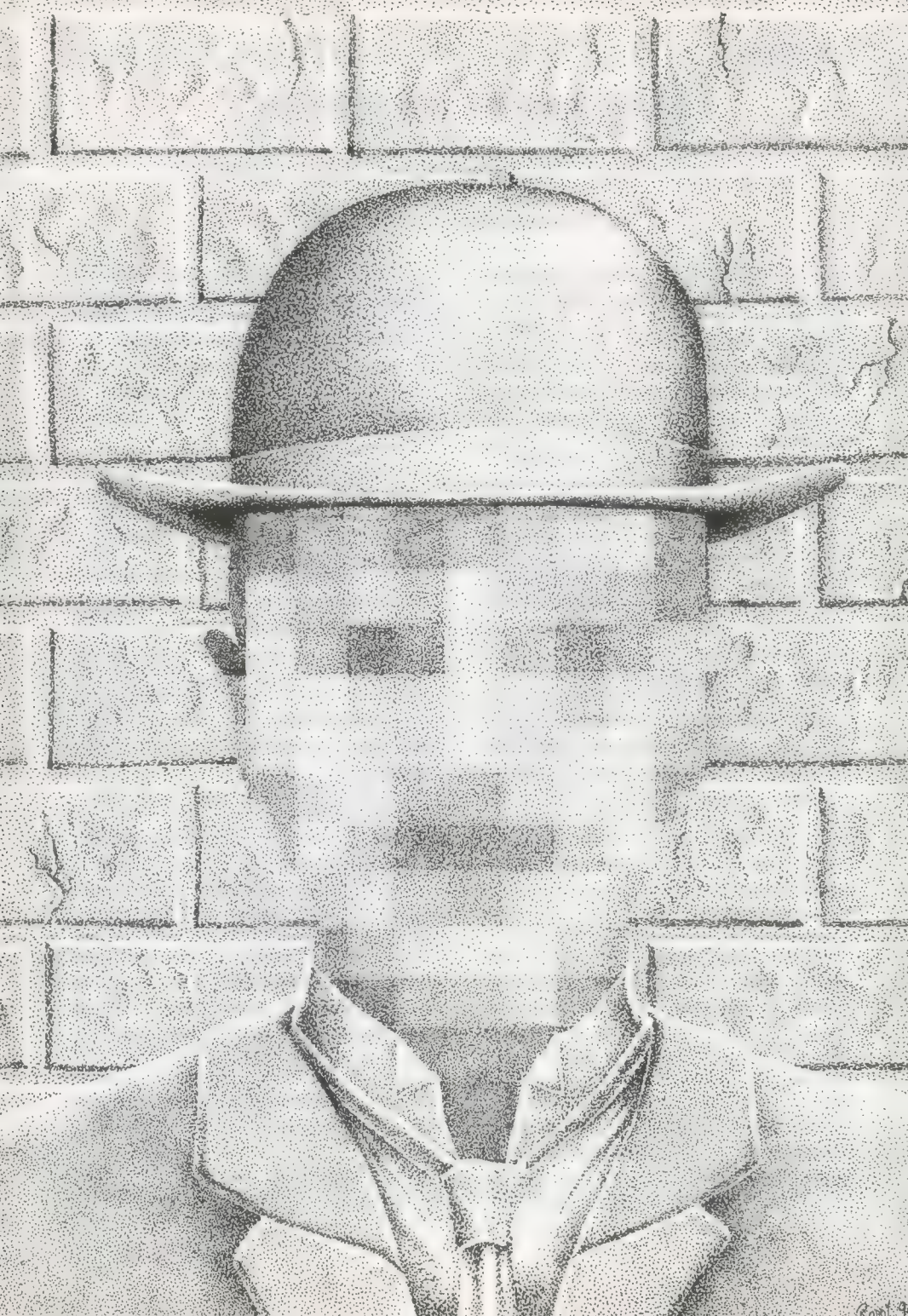
It is evening now. I am writing this by candlelight on the balcony. The tiny flame dazzles me with its brilliance. I can sense the earth spinning beneath me—and so much more. The gyrating planets hum with mindless, majestic power. I delight to the frenzied music of all-consuming supernovas. The titan whirl of our galaxy has me dizzy with insatiable desire. And yet—despite this glorious barrage of sensations—I can still detect a soft, thrilling voice, velvety as a boywhore's tongue. Make no mistake: though soft, the voice is imperious. And it is repeating my name.

Mammon, Belphegor, Asmodeus—you are but servants to the Dark Reveller who is my God. When I look into the night sky I can see His eyes, and they are ablaze with hunger.

A knock at the door. My God and I shall feed together.

Coming, Sharkey.

○ **Mark McLaughlin** is the editor of *The Urbanite*, a magazine of surreal city fiction and poetry—see page 3 for ordering details and address. His own fiction has appeared in such publications as *Tekeli-ili*, *Not One Of Us*, *Dark Infinity*, *Mystic Fiction*, *Argonaut*, *Fantasy Macabre*, the anthologies *The Year's Best Horror Stories XXI* and *XXII*, and *100 Wicked Little Witch Stories*; with more forthcoming in *Ghosts & Scholars*, *Galaxy*, and the *Industrial Gothic* anthology—as well as in *TTA* itself.



Mainstream Slipstream: the novels of Jeanette Winterson

reviewed by Gary Couzens

Jeanette Winterson was born in Lancashire in 1959. Her upbringing, as the adoptive daughter of an evangelist preacher, is widely known, as is her open lesbianism, which caused a breach with the church in which she was raised. This is widely known because it is the subject matter of her first, best and best known novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, which won the Whitbread Award for Best First Novel and was turned into a BAFTA award winning TV serial. *Oranges*, despite its strong autobiographical content, is not a standard novel for several reasons to be covered later, and Winterson has never been a writer in the realist mode. In her later novels, she departs even further from what may be termed 'consensus reality' and into outright, though often allegorical, fantasy. She is a slipstream writer in that she uses fantastical elements in a non-generic way. However, she is published in the literary mainstream—*Granta*, no less—and has won prizes, though she has never been nominated for the Booker. (It's a myth, one often peddled by a SF ghetto mentality, that the 'literary establishment' only values realism: it contains its fair share of fantasists—or magic realists, if you prefer—such as Ben Okri, Salman Rushdie and Angela Carter.)

Oranges, as I have said above, is a strongly autobiographical novel. Its first-person protagonist is even called Jeanette (Jess in the TV serial). The plot of this novel is as described above; it's an engaging, and often very funny, novel. For example, Jeanette is told not to go to a corner shop run by two elderly spinsters because 'they dealt in unnatural passions. I thought she [Jeanette's mother] meant they put chemicals in their sweets' [p.7]. So far, so straightforward. But

there is a formal sense at work here, not least in the way that the novel's eight sections are named after the first eight books of the Bible. And there are also passages such as this:

One day, I learned that Tetrahedron is a mathematical shape that can be formed by stretching an elastic band over a series of nails.

But Tetrahedron is an emperor...

The emperor Tetrahedron lived in a palace made absolutely from elastic bands. To the right, cunning fountains shot elastic jets, subtle as silk; to the left, ten minstrels played day and night on elastic lutes.

The emperor was beloved by all. [p.49]

These fantasy sequences (which can be read, as in this case, as flights of fancy or day-dreams) take the novel away from realism. Often they are used as allegories of Jeanette's situation. (In the TV serial, they were almost entirely done away with, except in short dream-like scenes at the beginning of each episode.)

Fantasy takes over in *Boating for Beginners*, Winterson's second novel, one she seems to disown, as it often does not appear in her bibliographies. In the one printed in *Art & Lies* it is described as 'comic book' (as opposed to 'fiction'). It was reputedly written before *Oranges* and published on the back of its success. It's certainly not a very good novel, being a laboured and not especially funny fantasia on Noah's Ark. There are occasional good lines (such as the opening one: 'At eighteen she realised she would never have the bone structure to be decadent') and over-nudging character names like Gloria Munde. All in all, a very minor work.

The Passion, which won the John Llewelyn Rhys Prize, is a magic-realist fable set in

Napoleonic times. It is narrated alternately by Henri, who hero-worships Napoleon and becomes his chicken cook, and by Villanelle, a web-footed Venetian girl who works in a casino. The theme of sexual ambiguity which was to become important in Winterson's later novels makes its first appearance here:

I [Villanelle] dressed as a boy because that's what the visitors liked to see. It was part of the game, trying to decide which sex was hidden behind tight breeches and extravagant face-paste... [p.54]

Other themes include the importance of storytelling (the last words of the novel, spoken by Henri, are 'I'm not telling you stories. Trust me.') and the start of a tendency in Winterson's novels which could be described as Romantic, in the original sense of the word. The primacy of feeling, emotion and love over order, society and hierarchy; the sense that our age is a spiritually mean-spirited one...all these have been in Winterson's work from the beginning, and come increasingly to the fore in her latest three novels.

Sexing the Cherry marked a transition in Winterson's work. If the earlier three novels could be read as (respectively and superficially) autobiographical, comic-fantastic and historical, *Sexing the Cherry* and its two successors cannot be read as anything but themselves: postmodern works where language takes precedence over plot, and the Romantic themes described above come to the surface. Winterson is not the only writer to do this, of course, but increasingly her works seem like tracts rather than novels, (in *Art & Lies* especially) lambasting us for our spiritual ills. This impression is exacerbated by the Biblical tone of much of Winterson's language: one of her acknowledged literary influences is the King James Bible.

Sexing the Cherry is set mostly in London around the time of the Plague and the Great Fire, but calling it a historical novel is about as useful as calling Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* a history of post-independence India. The central character is Jordan,

who lives with his mother (The Dog Woman) on the banks of the Thames. This is one reality; there are also others. There is the family who celebrate ceilings and deny floors, hence travelling by means of pulleys; there are twelve dancing princesses who escape to a floating city each night and murder their husbands; there is also twentieth-century London, beset with pollution. *Sexing the Cherry* is a difficult though rewarding novel, and was also the last novel of Winterson's (to date) to be critically well (or even respectfully) reviewed.

Written on the Body is set in a recognisable contemporary setting and is basically the story of the protagonist's troubled love for the mysterious, beautiful, flame-haired Louise. But there is a twist. The first-person protagonist has no gender. It is obvious why this device is there: it is intended to question how much our gender influences our behaviour. Is the central troubled romance heterosexual or homosexual, and does it make any difference either way? This device isn't totally successful (to this reader's mind, the narrator is often masculine-acting) and ultimately comes over as a gimmick to enliven an otherwise unremarkable and over-long love story.

Finally there is *Art & Lies*, Winterson's latest novel. If 'novel' is the right word: it is intended as a musical piece in words (hence its subtitle, 'A Piece for Three Voices and a Bawd'—it also ends with the score from the Trio of *Der Rosenkavalier*), or an epic poem in prose. The three voices are of Handel (a male doctor), Picasso (a female painter) and Sappho (a lesbian). Passages of high rhetoric mingle with passages of dense obscurity (in this context one passage of untranslated Latin and another of untranslated French do little but show off the range of Winterson's erudition, as does her raiding-the-thesaurus vocabulary). There is no 'plot' as such, just a Romantic tract on this age's lack of spirituality and emotional costiveness.

Winterson is a writer of great talent and commendable ambition. She places a high

value on language and her imagination makes her stand out amongst most of her contemporaries. She is also still young (mid-

thirties) and will hopefully extricate herself from the corner she has painted herself into of late. □

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- 1987 *The Passion* (Edition cited: Penguin p/b 1988)
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Short Stories

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- Great Moments in Aviation* (1993 film shown at that year's Cannes Festival, but so far unreleased) [both films directed by Beeban Kidron]

DUST NORMAN JOPE

I breathe upon the dust with alveolite life. These are the threadbare mirrors of my smile. I stand where dunes enact the last goodbyes of broken species. My hands are wrecked; a fragrance eats its way from mouth to mouth.

There is no more magick. There is only the sound of the secret; naked under hammers, silent in the whiteness.

I am layered folds of darkness in the darkness. I am worn away by holocaust. She bares her flesh and peels it to the bones, revealing garments that are white but cast no shadow. The dust of all we are amounts to total blackness; carbonised, we wait for violent gestures to repeat themselves, for death to quiver in the skin, for the blood to blossom like a maze turned whirlwind.

Sometimes I will come out of this mud, briefly; tell you the procedure. The judges are in wait. My landscape stiffens as they frown. This writing is not white, it is not hidden; it is crumbled and opaque. If you saw the dust, *saw* it as it was, you could see its firmaments of icon jewellery, its desolation no-one sharpens. I am falling through the vortex of my voice. My dying is a way of painting out my face. There could be so many termini, here where the dust is singular, where every speck is stuffed with an unending secret.

Dust refines us as it scythes — is eater of the face *and* stalking-ground for feet. That much is certain in these territories. You, less certain — I, still less so.

If I am here, then I will answer. Then / will also sleep, with you, no sooner than your smile reveals the desert in the moment, the wilderness where every shape is marching.

London Wall

Nicholas Royle

It all began with a photograph. "Caption these," someone said to him, dropping a pile of Polaroids on his desk in a swirl of nicotine and Joop. It must have been Amanda, with her haunting hazel eyes, billowing chiffon, and arms as thin as England's chances of winning the World Cup before the next millennium.

Chris flicked through the photographs, then spread them out on his desk as if for a game of patience. There were seven pictures, all apparently by the same photographer, views of London but with a difference.

Amanda sailed past his desk again. She was pleasant enough, sometimes said please and thank you, but most likely didn't keep her dinner down for very long, and in Chris's experience that meant trouble. He turned the photographs over. Someone had jotted caption information on the back of six of them with a black Lumocolor, but the reverse of the seventh picture was blank. Six of them were exteriors, including the one without notes, which showed a bricked-up doorway in an otherwise featureless grey wall. The only interior picture was a festival of perspectives, shot down a marble corridor with archways and pillars set into the wall.

Chris had been jumping on and off London's freelance merry-go-round for a couple of years, and he had another week to go at the Picture This Photo Library. He wouldn't be sorry when the week was up and he could get back to, what...listening to his One Dove CDs, drinking beer, daydreaming and desultorily following Liverpool Football Club. Didn't earn a living though, did it? But he'd been in the game long enough to know he could get more work without too much effort. The game being picture research. It would do

until he decided what he wanted to do. Or until Alison wrote from Edinburgh and asked him to join her there and just sort of look after her flat while she was out at work, and generally be nice to her when she came home in the evening. She'd gone there to assert her independence, she said, and for the 30K dangled in front of her.

Well, fair enough, but what about this photograph? He put it to one side for a moment and captioned the other six. That took about ten minutes. He no longer bothered taking half an hour to perfect his captions. What was the point, they only got rewritten. He'd let other people get in a flap over where to put the commas, but he did take pride in getting the facts right. A picture without a caption was like a person with amnesia: you've got an identity, you just don't know what it is.

He studied the remaining picture. An unremarkable wall, could be anywhere. He knew it was in London, they had a big job on providing unusual shots of the capital for a major client, but the picture offered few clues. At the right hand side of the picture a flight of steps led up from the level of the doorway: they, and the paving flags in the foreground, would help identify the location if he were to pass it by chance. The flags were laid out in a regular grid like a chess board and curiously the steps were not worn away in the middle, indicating that they received little use. But this was so much pointless conjecture: Chris had no idea where the wall was and for the meantime he simply keyed in 'London Wall', capping up the 'W' to pretend it was indeed at London Wall. Closing the file, he got up and stretched, then sauntered over to Jenny's desk.

"So have you got a number for this photographer?" he asked Jenny, a chestnut-haired girl with a permanently running nose. It had always seemed a mistake to him, putting her in charge of filing transparencies. One drip and it's goodbye picture.

"Which photographer?" she asked him, flicking her hair out of her face and dabbing at her nose with a tissue that could have been carbon-dated back to the Pleistocene era.

He showed her the Polaroid.

"That's Lee Jules," she said. "Hang on, I'll find his number for you."

She was so obliging.

Chris smiled as she handed him a bright pink Post-It. "Thanks."

He called the number and got Lee Jules' answering machine. The outgoing message made him sound older than the name and style of the photographs had suggested. Chris was twenty-seven but the blond curls that tumbled down over his forehead gave him the appearance of a young angel, albeit a debauched one judging by the charcoal smudges under his eyes. He left a message asking the photographer to call him back.

After work Chris took the long way round to Liverpool Street, partly because he liked wandering around town. But also because he thought, looking at the photograph again, the colour of the stone steps and the wall itself could place the location just west of Spitalfields or, indeed, London Wall. That particular grey seemed to evoke the steady resilience of the past at the confluence of those two districts, where the present threatened to slide right over history without a backward glance: in Spitalfields' case the gentrification of the old market seemed particularly sad, taken over by echoing pizza parlours and five-a-side football courts; at London Wall you just had the sense that it would be nice to see a section of original wall just standing there without any support from Britain's heritage industry with its cancer of brown signs.

Chris wandered down the back alleys and dead ends, hoping to chance upon a flight of steps he may once have trotted down on the way to some tryst and so barely have noticed the bricked-up doorway at the bottom. But he

found nothing and so headed for the shining new magnificence of Liverpool Street Station, proof if it was needed that architects could still stitch splendour out of rough and sordid stuff. His train was twelve and a half minutes late.

His receding view of the station reminded him of another. Just a week or two into the new year he'd gone up to see Alison in Edinburgh. He'd admired her flat, vocally appreciated its views both inside and out, but hadn't fully understood how she had the heart to live in an area such as Morningside, which was more blue rinse than *Blue Velvet*. When Alison disappeared into the kitchen to put the kettle on he trailed a finger across the cassette boxes under the brand new television and he couldn't even see the copy of Lynch's film he'd given her the previous Christmas. No one said you had to like your presents, but it meant something perhaps if you hung on to them. Alison's return was announced by the soft stab of her stilettos on the polished boards. She kicked them off when she saw him looking at her feet. Did he want Earl Grey or Darjeeling? "Have you got any coffee?" he asked her. Decaf all right? It would have to do.

The only surprise on her video shelf was a new-looking *Betty Blue*. While the tops of the other boxes were filmed with dust, its was not: another present presumably. She'd not liked the film when Chris had taken her to see it. They'd both sat uncomfortably through the opening sex scene, bristling with their own thoughts and anxieties.

"Still not smoking?" she asked him, as if taking up the habit were an inevitable part of getting through your twenties. He shook his head. She broke two matches lighting a Marlboro. He noticed the packet had come from a machine in a pub. She hadn't removed the cellophane wrapper with its printed text warning of reduced contents.

It hadn't been a particularly good visit and on the Sunday afternoon he'd watched Waverley station fail to keep up in the train's slipstream, still wondering who had given Alison a video of that most erotic and emotional film and whether the same man

had been at the bar getting in a couple of G&Ts while she fed fifties into the vending machine for her seventeen Marlboro.

The following morning Chris was too close to being late to have another look for the mysterious doorway on his way into work, but when he did get in there was a message for him to call Lee Jules. First he would get a coffee and eat his croissant from the corner caff, one of those places with permanently misted windows and, disappointingly, no one inside except a big, weary Italian man who'd leave a thumbprint on your iced bun that would have forensics foaming at the mouth. Chris's milk had turned overnight and his butter was too hard to spread, prompting him to wonder if it was personal between him and the fridge.

Wiping his fingers on yesterday's serviette, Chris took the Post-It with Jules's number on it and tapped the digits into his keypad. The phone rang five times and then was answered by a not unfriendly voice, clearly that of Lee Jules. Chris thanked him for returning his call and explained the reason for his query. The photographer said he'd be happy to take Chris to the very spot where he'd taken the picture in question and Chris, with a quick glance at his desk, agreed to this, hanging up as he realised he hadn't asked Jules where it was. But the man had said to meet him at St Paul's tube, which lent no weight at all to Chris's Spitalfields theory, though London Wall was still in with a shout.

The rich thing about that weekend with Alison was that *she* had questioned *him* about other women, lightheartedly but apparently with serious intent. With his newfound freedom had he started seeing anyone else? "Deceit is not one of my talents," he told her. "I go red whenever I'm accused of anything. If anything got broken in our house I'd just go red, even before the question was asked. You'd know instantly if I told you a lie." So tell me the truth, she'd suggested, as if she wanted to hear about all the girls he hadn't slept with since she'd moved to Edinburgh. If you go red anyway I wouldn't know when you were lying. "You would. I go a deeper shade of red when I've actually done whatever it is

I'm accused of. Anyway, much as it may disappoint you, or seem old-fashioned, I happen to be a one-woman man."

More of a serial monogamist, surely? she'd said.

Yeah, like he *wanted* to have a string of relationships with women which would sail so far down the river of infatuation, into the estuary of deeper understanding and founder on the rocks of banality. He was too nice, that was his trouble. Women didn't like men to be too nice to them. They said they did, but they didn't mean it. It was the mean-spirited, lantern-jawed suave-talking tailor's dummies they really dreamed of. The sort of man who would tell them to hold on while he took a call on his mobile half way through dinner. They'd hate him for it and that would only make the sex better when they finally got home, which was always her place rather than his because he didn't want her steaming up his bathroom mirror the next morning and leaving long hairs in the shower.

"Who is it this time?" his so-called friends would ask. "Is it worth you telling us her name?" They'd talk about getting together to meet 'the new woman', but by the time they did he would be seeing someone else. In any case, they'd be about as friendly as driving test examiners, and then they'd wonder why he didn't call again for a while. Like they didn't know how to pick up the phone themselves and dial.

Maybe they were envious, one or two of them, those whose relationships had become mired in the silt of routine. But if so it was misplaced envy: he longed for their calm waters and deep anchorage, their lack of a horizon. Except for the big one, of course, but he tried not to think about that. Pushing thirty, no kids or real career: it didn't do to contemplate death.

Standing outside St Paul's tube Chris realised he had no idea what Jules looked like, unless the image his voice had conjured up turned out to be a likeness. So he looked around him at everyone who came out of the station. Most were in a hurry, though Chris couldn't guess where they might be going. It

wasn't a big area for buses and they'd just got off the tube.

"Excuse me, Chris?" A voice like the muddy gravel at the bottom of a coffee cup. The telephone had given it a higher pitch.

Chris turned and met Lee Jules for the first time. He was an impressive sight. Taller than Chris by six inches, he had long, luxurious black hair threaded with silver, and dark grey eyes that glimmered like twin conger eels behind lenses of aquarium glass. They stood looking at each other for a few moments before Chris broke the spell just by looking away and Jules suggested they cross the road. The photographer led him so quickly through the streets north of St Paul's, his long coat tails flapping like vestigial wings, that Chris, skilled though he was in map reading and with an accurate sense of direction, became disorientated. He would think he recognised a letter box on a street corner but then there would be an entirely different view around the edge of the next building than the one he'd been expecting. Somehow they walked for fifteen minutes or so without crossing a single busy road, unless they crossed them at obscure points where they narrowed right down to squeeze through gaps in the maze of buildings. The City was confusing at the best of times, but since the Baltic Exchange bomb its map had been subtly altered, dams had been dropped across major channels and streams of traffic sent tumbling down unfamiliar gulleys. Chris was lost even before they turned a corner into a small tree-lined square—he tried to see up to read the name but either they were still moving too fast or he'd shrunk in relation to his surroundings and couldn't read it—and Jules suddenly slowed down, spinning round for the first time to check that Chris was still with him. They crossed the square and walked more slowly down an unnamed street that had only a couple of lonely cars parked at the top end due to the fact that the street offered no other exit apart from a flight of steps. The walls on both sides of the cul-de-sac were grey, whether actual stone or mere rendering Chris couldn't tell, and even before Jules came to a halt Chris knew they were there.

A number of standard remarks ran through Chris's head but he uttered none of them as he stood and looked at the doorway. It was bricked up right to the Georgian arch. There seemed to be no interstices. It just was.

"Well, that's it," Chris said, his voice sounding strangely loud in the still evening. "But I still don't really know where it is." Jules said nothing. "For my caption," Chris continued.

"Maybe not," Jules spoke again for the first time since the tube station, "but you'll find it again if you need to. You know your way around."

Chris stepped back and looked at the wall, tried to take in the building, but in the darkness he couldn't where it ended and the sky began.

"What is it?" he asked the man.

"A doorway," said the voice behind him.

"But where to? Why is it bricked up?"

"It's not."

Chris let that hang in the air a while.

Then: "What do you mean, it's not?"

"It's not bricked up, that's all. It might look it, but it's not."

"It certainly does look it," said Chris, approaching the doorway and placing the flat of his hand against the cool bricks. "Seems pretty bricked up to me."

Jules stepped up to the wall behind Chris and scraped a match across the rough brickwork. It flared up and Jules cupped his hand around the flame to light a cigarette. A pungent smell permeated the night, not that of any brand Chris recognised.

"To me also," said Jules, dropping the match in the road. "But don't let that deceive you."

Chris was beginning to feel the sly tickle of unease. Jules could be dangerous. All he knew about the man was his telephone number.

"Behind this doorway," Jules said, "lie your possible pasts."

Chris wanted to turn round and look at him but was too scared. With half his mind he thought the man was mad and he wanted to run right up the steps and away into the night, never to set eyes on him again; but the

other half of his mind tingled with forbidden excitement at the very idea of possible pasts.

"Have you ever wondered what might have happened if you'd done this or that, instead of what you did do, where you could be now, what you could be doing, who you could be with?"

The man's deep voice, having taken on a near hypnotic quality, resonated in Chris's head.

"It's a brick wall," said Chris in a monotone.

"Run at it fast enough and you'll get through."

Chris shuffled away from the wall towards the steps. His head had begun to ache and the steps looked inviting. He sat down and rested his head in his hands, wondering what was going on, and when he looked up again the photographer had gone. He got up and walked back to where they'd both been standing but there was no sign of the man. He peered into the gloom at the far end of the street where it ran into the little square. Nothing. He turned back and looked at the bricked-up doorway. Zilch.

As if he needed some bad news after a night like that, the morning delivery brought a letter with an Edinburgh postmark. Alison never wrote letters. She'd had her letter-writing gland removed in a painless operation when she was twenty-one. So it had to be bad news. Chris put it off for two minutes while he brushed his teeth and crunched a couple of Solpadeine. Clearly, spending an evening in the company of a psychopathic photographer staring at a bricked-up doorway produced pretty much the same result as drinking six pints of Guinness and saying "I'll have the chicken phall, please" to the smiling man in the red blazer.

After Lee Jules's disappearing act had failed to produce an encore, Chris had left the scene by way of the flight of stone steps. Pretty soon he'd started to recognise his surroundings, passing the outlying buildings of St Bede's Hospital where the gorgeous Sue had once worked, the nurse he'd met on a riverboat disco some years earlier and tried

without success to see again despite a number of telephone calls and a night spent camped out in the corridor by her room in the nurses' hostel.

Chris could stand the tension no longer. He sliced open the recycled blue envelope—beneath the label bearing his address he could make out Alison's name and address, though someone had misspelt Alison, which took some doing—and out fell a simple folded piece of lined notepaper. He looked at it without unfolding it and thought that he could just throw it away or burn it without ever reading it. He knew what it would say. I'm sorry, Chris, but it's just not working out. Dear Chris, it had to happen some time. I've met this really great guy. Chris, hey, it's over. Like, I'm sorry.

He unfolded the paper and saw that he had not been wrong. He crumpled it into a ball and threw it in the trash, then went into the bathroom to stare at his face in the mirror for about ten minutes, watching for a reaction. We all have our ways of dealing with grief. He was staring at what she'd rejected. Some of the time he wouldn't see past the surface, the imperfectly shaved chin, the uneven sideburns and the mole on the side of his nose; the blond curls, the bags, the big grey eyes. Then his gaze would shoot right through all of that and not stop until it reached his very core, which was small and red, just beginning to smart with pain. But at least there was still something there to hurt. He had feared it might have had enough and packed up and gone wherever broken hearts go to die.

No more return tickets to Edinburgh. That would save him some money. There was always a bright side if you looked hard enough.

At work he told Amanda the London Wall caption had been close enough and she said it was a good job because the pictures and text had all gone off to be printed the night before and it would be too late to make any changes. If she hadn't been so painfully thin he'd have given her a hard stare for that, but she had enough problems without him adding to them and feeling guilty about it for the rest of the day. After lunch he took out his battered little red address book and phoned a

couple of friends to see if by any chance they were free for a pint after work. Tony was going out on a hot date ("So the agency wasn't a complete waste of money then?"), Ian was playing squash with Sally Montague (more of a damp date given the state of Ian's sweat glands), and Sarah was like, really busy, yeah, for the next three weeks. He tried another number, Stuart's, but hung up before his former flatmate had chance to get to the phone: he'd be free, you could take that for granted, but he'd only want to talk about his own problems and at the end of the night Chris would stagger home with two worrisome burdens on his shoulders instead of just one. Going out for a drink on his own would be preferable to seeing Stuart. In fact, spending a week in a Turkish jail alone in a cell with a group of Manchester United fans would be preferable to seeing Stuart.

"Hi Stuart," Chris said, "glad you could make it."

It was just before six and Chris was settling in at The Falcon, just raising his first pint of Boddingtons when Stuart turned up.

"Yeah, well, I didn't really feel like going out, not after last night, but you talked me into it."

Chris waited but Stuart didn't say any more.

"I'll get you a pint, Stu," he offered.

"Yeah, all right."

He looked back at Stu while he was waiting to be served. Hunched over the table, he had already started shredding the beermats. His dark hair was long and shiny with grease. It was a wonder he could see through his glasses, which looked like the front windows of an abandoned house next to a busy trunk road. His beard was a Site of Special Scientific Importance; a team of archaeologists once got lost in it for three days and there was a spread on them in *Hello!* magazine when they finally got out. Once, waiting for a tube in Holborn Underground station Stuart had been moved on by the police.

If by deciding to see Stuart after all, Chris had been thinking he might cheer himself up by witnessing a specimen whose problems

were incomparably worse than his own, he was wrong: just the sight of the man depressed him. How he had shared a flat with Stuart for six months without killing him was a mystery.

"So how's it going, Stuart?" he asked, depositing a pint of lager top in front of the man mountain.

"Do you want to hear about last night?" Stuart asked in his nasal Black Country whine.

Yeah, like I'd like to hear a man in a white coat with a stethoscope round his neck tell me to sit down because what he's got to tell me is quite serious.

"Sure. Fire away."

It was some pathetic story about going to a party and being snubbed by a beautiful woman. Chris resisted the temptation to tell Stuart to smarten up his act. It had all been said before and to no avail. He'd once bought a new pair of glasses and sat on them the very next morning when he fell out of bed.

Chris got steadily more and more depressed as the pints passed through him and Stu's moaning droned on and on. In the gents Chris was slumped with his forehead against the moist wall repeating to himself "I hate you Stuart, I hate you Stuart" when the big man came in and urinated down his trouser leg. At least life couldn't get much worse.

Finally extricating himself from Stu's embrace outside the pub, Chris floundered off in the opposite direction to the tube station, because that's where Stu would be heading. Chris had lost count of how many pints they'd had but it was almost into double figures. He was leaning so far forward as he walked, his stride lurched into a half-run, and he continued in a directionless manner, intent only on putting a reasonable distance between him and Stu. He promised himself he'd never see him again; even if Stu rang up and said he was going to kill himself, he'd make up some excuse, hang up and not feel bad about it. "A 29 year-old man was found dead in his ground floor flat in Kilburn last night. Police do not suspect foul play. A note was found with the salutation 'Dear Chris'." Chris Williams, 28, was known to be a friend

of the deceased." A streetlamp flickered and buzzed as Chris ran beneath it and into a little square, which rang a bell somewhere deep in his memory. He crossed the square and entered a little street with a flight of steps at the end, stopping when he saw the doorway in the wall to his left.

He fell against it, tested the bricks with his hand. Solid as a rock. He got up, took a step back and clumsily shoulder-charged the wall. It held and he rubbed his shoulder, muttering to himself. He ran from a few feet away and turned at the last minute so that his back hit the bricks. "Oh you think you're so clever, don't you, Mr Lee Jules, so-called photographer," he said, taking a longer run-up. He rested against the wall on the other side of the street, panting, glaring at the bricked-up doorway. "Life is...*disappointing*," he confirmed, then ran at full pelt across the street, straight at the doorway. He didn't turn away, he didn't flinch. He just ran right into it without stopping.

He woke up in casualty, dimly becoming aware of bustle all around, nurses leaning over his body which was stretched out full length on a trolley. Instructions were given in voices that were calm but serious. You wouldn't argue with them. He wasn't sure what he could feel. Pain came and went in different parts of his body and he thought it could be imaginary.

A lovely-looking nurse with dark curly hair and soft lips looked at him. "He's come round," she said. "Can you hear me? It's Sue. You're okay. You've been in an accident."

Sue? It couldn't be, could it? She looked like her, the same kind, round face; she was a big, pretty girl.

"It was a nasty accident but you'll be okay. Try and relax."

He opened his mouth. It felt dry and sore. "Is it you?" he asked her in a croaky voice.

"Just try and relax," she was saying to him.

"It's Chris," he said.

"I know, Chris. Try not to speak." There were tears brimming in her eyes.

"Where am I?" he asked, looking from face to face.

"You're in St Bede's Accident and Emergency, but you must calm down. Don't worry."

Sue stepped away from his side when one of the doctors called her. They were doing something to his legs. He couldn't feel anything down there. Then a face appeared where Sue's had been, a wise, kindly face he knew at once.

"It's you, you bastard," he smiled ruefully at Lee Jules. "Too bad I didn't make it, eh? Shame I didn't get through."

Jules took hold of his right hand. "Oh but you did, Chris," he said. "You did."

Chris stared at him.

"The nurse, Sue. You went out with her, you married her."

"No," Chris shook his head. "It's impossible. What am I doing here?" He was out of his depth, panicking.

"You were involved in a road accident. They're talking about you losing a leg. They are going to amputate your left leg."

"No," he repeated. "It's not happening. I ran into a wall. That's all."

Sue came back. "You'll have to leave, sir," she said to Jules, but he was already gone, and she turned back to Chris, taking his hand as the photographer had done. Her tears were falling now, rolling over the little patches of red bloom on her cheeks.

"Chris," she whispered. "Hold on, Chris."

○ *Nicholas Royle's first novel Counterparts was published by Penguin in March 1995 (originally published by Barrington Books in 1993). Penguin are publishing his second novel, Saxophone Dreams, in March 1996, in the mainstream list as a paperback original.*

○ *Norman Jope (see Dust on page 46) was born in Plymouth in 1960. Until recently he was editor of Memes, and his own writing continues to appear in various collections.*

○ *Gary Couzens (see Profile on page 44) was born in 1964 and currently lives in Aldershot. His non-fiction has appeared in The Punter, BFS Newsletter, Dementia 13, Loving, City Life and Zene, amongst others.*



from Nicholas Royle

James Miller's story is absolutely bloody brilliant. He's 18? Unbelievable. The Tim Nickels and Chris Kenworthy stories are also excellent. Shortly after reading Mat Coward's poignant story in which a man opens a can of draught beer to find it flat, I cracked open a can of Boddington's. Guess what? The widget didn't work and the Cream of Manchester came out flat. The new design is a huge improvement—the titles and bylines look much better than before, much more professional—pretty damn cool. Good cover too. What's going on?

from James Miller

I personally am glad you've dropped the subtitle. I think the fact that such a small detail has generated so much controversy in the letters page is a very positive sign. It means readers really like the mag and really care about what you're trying to do. I can appreciate the need, in order to market the mag, of having something to express what it's about, but when I showed some friends TTA6 they were initially contemptuous of the subtitle, and I found myself trying to explain, "Well, it's horror, but without the embarrassing bits; it's sort of surreal..." etc, etc. I'm afraid that, for the uninformed reader (which, let's face it, is most people), horror and all that still has rather derogatory connotations. For me there is still only one word that captures the fiction you publish, and that's 'slipstream'. The fact that TTA has gone from strength to strength and must now be one of the best mags in the business is, I think, testament to the acceptability of this term, despite some initial reactionary criticism. The term's ambiguity also allows for diversity, and, I think, is also sufficiently enigmatic to attract the curious casual reader who might not think that 'horror' interests them.

Anyway, on to the contents. Firstly, the cover: wow! Liked it a lot. Menacing, yet subtle, for me the best yet. Checkley's other art wasn't at all bad either. I'll look forward to

his next selection. I thought *Because of Dust* was tremendous. Chris Kenworthy writes beautifully, with an almost Woolfian eye for the subtleties and hidden intimacies that define all human relationships. His story was like a melancholic *Remembrance of Things Past*; full of wonderfully sensual and delicate details. A sad and painful story, but also very tender and touching. Steve Antczak and Paul Pinn both delivered the goods as well. Pinn's bizarre, downbeat vision was especially seductive: the real world gradually shifting to something utterly alien, and yet still fearfully familiar. I'm not sure what drugs Allen Ashley has been doing, but I think I want some! I don't know what to make of his satirical cocktail of self-consciously post-modern pastiche and counter pastiche (!?) but I loved it. Rick Cadger gave us another clever story that, just when I thought I knew what was going to happen, completely threw me with its sudden and surreal shift. Loved it. I also enjoyed Gwyneth Hughes' and Mat Coward's pieces. I think Mat is an especially good writer; always ingenious and lucid, sharpened with a devastating wit. So, all in all, a great issue. I just wish I didn't read it so quickly—I just can't help myself!

from Murray C Steward

Chris Kenworthy's *Because of Dust* is by far the best story I've read by him, and one of the finest stories I've read anywhere for a long time. It has precisely that sense of vivid realism to which Chris attached so much importance in his (in)famous article way back in TTA1. The painful honesty with which he confronted 'his' selfish feelings of bereavement after Rachel's death, and his guilty resentment of the never-to-be-fulfilled sexual potential in their relationship, was handled brilliantly. The only very slightly artificial note, I felt, was struck in the 'worm charming' sequence at the end, but what the hell, it was a damn good metaphor, and this is fiction after all (isn't it?).

I also particularly enjoyed the stories by Rick Cadger, Steve Antczak and especially

Letters

Tim Nickels...all 'typical' TTA stories, if such a thing can be said to exist: a kind of heightened realism, in which one or more incongruous elements throw the minute horrors and absurdities of daily existence into sharp relief (surrealism, in fact, if that term didn't bring with it so much unfortunate baggage).

As regards your 'subtitle' dilemma, it does seem as if, despite all protests to the contrary, people *do* like to have little consumer-friendly labels stuck on their art/literature/entertainment/whatever before they'll commit themselves to anything so radical as a purchase. Sadly, nowhere does this tendency seem more pronounced than amongst the various camp-followers of the horror/sf/fantasy genres (the very people one would expect to be a little more open-minded)...almost as if they're scared to find themselves accidentally enjoying something that wasn't aimed at their particular mindset. Personally I'd put no more info on the cover than title, number, price and a handful of bylines (basically, as with TTA7): any potential buyers who were at all familiar with the small press scene would be likely to recognise one or two writers' names, while those who were new to indie publications (and I can only speak from my own experience here) would surely be sufficiently intrigued by cover art such as David Checkley's, Dave Mooring's and Ben Mitchell's that they'd at least manage to prise the covers open long enough to check out the contents?

In closing, I'd like to say how much I enjoyed TTA7 as a whole; the standard just seems to get higher all the time, which can only be a good thing for the future of UK—and international—fiction. Also, David Checkley's artwork complemented the fiction perfectly.

from Rick Cadger

As usual, TTA is the absolute dog's dangling bits. I can find nothing at all to criticise about TTA—it ranks alongside *BBR* at the very peak of indie publishing perfection. As for the contents, the fiction you

select is very much my sort of thing: enigmatic, sincere and stylishly executed. Syconphancy aside, I am proud to have my work published in such a cool mag, and in such accomplished company.

The subtitle: drop it. It is an unnecessary shackle. The material that appears in TTA is of such variety that no concise subtitle could do it justice. Let the fiction speak for itself. TTA's identity is so strong that no reader could be left unsure of its aims. And the mag's quality will ensure that its reputation alone provides all the info required by prospective readers.

A TTA anthology is not a good idea...it is a necessity. A mixture of 'best of' and unpublished gems too good to wait their turn in the normal publishing queue. A paperback volume is appropriate—it is now the 'entry level' format for serious publishing. If the editing is as tight as it has been up to now, the collection would certainly receive monster reviews rivalling those earned by the Eger-ton and Barrington anthologies. You can trust me, I'm a critic...(rubs hands in slimy, Faginesque gesture).

from Mat Coward

TTA7: best yet, I reckon, certainly in presentation. David Checkley's art is superb throughout. And I reckon Tim Nickels' *Air-babies* is the most entirely satisfying piece of fiction you've yet published.

I was interested in something you said in the editorial: "My personal preference (and yours too, I assume, since you're reading this) is for a literary, subtle approach". I wonder if that's necessarily true? I can see why an editor would think so, but isn't it more likely that most readers read a range of magazines, and are looking for *good* fiction, wherever it appears on the spectrum? My personal preference, for instance, is really for more trad sf: time travel, alternative universes, alien invasions. But if you want to eat blackberries, you have to go where the best brambles are—and at the moment, most of the best seems to be happening in the slipstream field.

[*Mat Coward's first book, Cannibal Victims Speak Out, is published now by Gollancz, priced £3.99.*]

from David Curl

TTA7 must be the best issue yet. Apart from anything else, the presentation really works (and I'm sure this must be as influential in marketing terms as the 'phrase' used on the front of the magazine in order to describe the contents. It's the visual appeal of a magazine's cover as much as the text that makes a browsing reader take it from the magazine stand...). The decision to use one artist for all the visuals in this case proves tremendously successful — and I love the illustration *Bogeyman*: disturbingly resonant, given the Jamie Bulger case, modern fears over child abuse, etc.

Shaun Jeffrey asks, "So why is that nowadays horror has become a byword for inferior fiction? Why do people shudder more at the mention of the dreaded word than at the tales?" Sometimes horror really can be "anathema to morality", that is, a life-hating attempt on the part of someone possessed of rhetorical power to break down the ideological structures which allow another person to function as an autonomous human being. Not often, I admit. Sometimes, a scary book or a scary movie thrills you the way nothing else can—but sometimes (you're feeling ill, or bankrupt, or hungover; you're feeling broken up about a friend's fourth suicide attempt in as many weeks) you want something to cheer you up, something life-enhancing. Life's full enough of horrors, it seems kind of perverse to deliberately invent more. Utopianism, the belief that the darkness, the unknown, can be brought within some form of dominion—now that's another matter. Hey, I could start getting all cultural studies on you, it's that time of night—but no.

from Andrew Hook

After reading Shaun Jeffrey's letter I had to refer back to see what I'd actually written [in TTA6]. As I suspected, it had nothing to do

with killing chickens. To continue his metaphor, my concern was that TTA might not only be turning away from duck eggs, platypus eggs, and alligator eggs, but also restricting its menu to omelettes. Nothing wrong with a good omelette or a good horror story, but the magazine which stands out (for me) is the one that has a selection of great stories all linked by an undercurrent theme rather than an overt one; so that you don't know what you are going to be digesting until it is actually inside you. My fear was that TTA might start to exclude stories such as Peter Finch's *Partying* in TTA3, or Paul Pinn's *La Trampa Latina* in TTA2, which were both great, but which in my view would not be suited to such a subtitle. TTA is more than a horror magazine, not because of the quality, but because of the diversity; and subtitles can only exclude.

from Neil K Henderson

At the risk of sounding like a squinny zealot with the needle stuck in the record, I have to say in all honesty that DF Lewis was my favourite in this issue. I've admired his work since I became aware of it in the late '80s, and his prodigious output completely boggles my staggering faculties. How he manages to keep to such a high standard is a matter for awe and wonderment in this quarter. It's not just the obvious inventiveness of his imagination, but his *style* in putting it across: 'The three of us crowded off—like a gang of children with some secrets overlapping, others not'. Wonderfully evocative. I suppose a lot of my enthusiasm is down to personal taste, but I really think DF has a special something that sets him above the common herd. Art, possibly. Individuality, certainly. (And why was his name omitted from the front cover? Is this a reaction to ubiquity?)

Second favourite was *Airbabies*. Another 'tingle factor' producer, ever-so gently sliding the rug out from under reality to leave it hanging in mid-air like a big question mark. Of the rest, nothing failed to please.

Letters

Do You Know This Man? was slightly spoiled for me by having read Mat Coward's piece about professional writing in *Zene* #4. I couldn't help thinking of him dashing it out between strokes of the toothbrush, before knocking off a novel during porridge. Having said that, I liked his treatment of the familiar theme.

from Paul Pinn

Take-off with *Airbabies* rather than aircraft and get some supreme cabin service. Business Class? Not 'alf, mate. Thai Air all the way, and like Thai it was intriguing and endearing, and just as baffling. Good ride, though. And was the illo chosen because the gent resembles Mr Nickels, or because Punch is a hand puppet and full of air when he ain't full of hand?

Do You Know This Man? was perhaps the weakest of the issue, although nevertheless not too bad. As it turned out I did know this man, and I'm sure I'm not the only one. A predictable shuttle between two relatively uninteresting places. Then came Paris with *In Person*: no doubt the psychotherapist mentioned at the end blew a gasket when he read the story. I'm no great lover of dolls in literature, but won't let that detract from the story's merit and depths of meaning. Was the illo tagged on the end because the kid resembles Chuckie doll? Or does the story have hidden meanings concerning dodgy gents kidnapping kids in parks? Ah ha! Of course, so obvious — the enforced corruption of childhood innocence, as symbolised by dolls.

Never mind, it's off with Captain James Miller of Nietzsche Airlines, with the influential Joel Lane and Chris Kenworthy as incorporeal co-pilots. And what a surprise! For a chap so young, Capt Miller flies a mean machine. At 18 I could barely get off the ground in a Sopwith Camel, much less write a story worth reading. *The Outpost* was a groovy place indeed, and I wouldn't be surprised if Miller's learning curve advances so rapidly that he becomes an astronaut by the time he's 25. Then he'll be able to write and

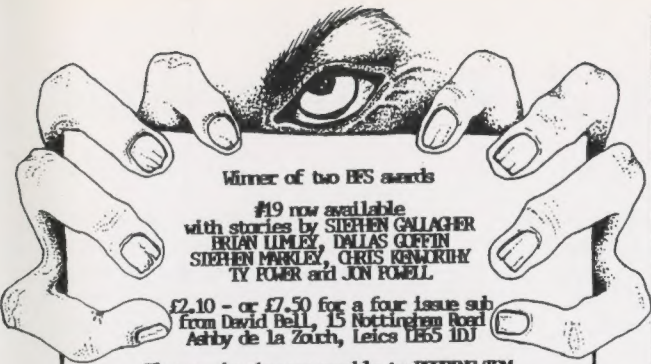
hang out in weirder places than anything on Planet Earth. One to watch.

Rick Cadger's *Fragments* was an endearing little tale, which suggests that writers with children who feature children in their stories, do so with greater sensitivity than childless writers who seem to use the little brats as vehicles for abuse and eventual destruction. Personally, I'm all for converting them into comfortable economy class seating. *The Disappeared*, so to speak, and John and Tina must be praised for their potent verse which struck a chord immediately.

Alas, *A Brief Visit to Bonnyville* turned out to be a series of cancellations ending in a ten hour delay at Gatwick Airport. The wordsmith's skills were undeniably impressive, but like an aero-engineer on acid, the result wasn't Concorde but a misshapen rocket made of Albanian steel filled with propellant distilled from daisy roots. Allen Ashley's *Elvis* was in-flight entertainment. Who says slipstream can't be funny? Of course I didn't laugh out loud in case someone was monitoring me, but I did grin (behind my hand in case someone was...). Presumably the chimp in the illo is Elvis and the geezer with the gun is Allen. Chris Kenworthy's *Because of Dust* was a calming excursion into the magnified dust motes of the Gambian bush where even the flies take it easy.

The Tides of Quiddity raises questions. Is Shad really the author? Was the Sumatran grass really acid? Was the contact on the beach really the author's mate, Peter? Did Peter threaten horrible things if he was named in the story? Is the story 90% true? Rumours abound but at the end of the day who cares? The song lines, ley lines and the lines of the mind still snake through the haze, and the signposts still cast their jokes. The illo makes this abundantly clear.

And finally, *Pop Goes Weasel*. Nothing too heavy here, just an entertaining but relatively straight flight to the end of the world as encapsulated by one's interpretation of TTA7. Content was way above good. The illos were great, the front cover a killer. □



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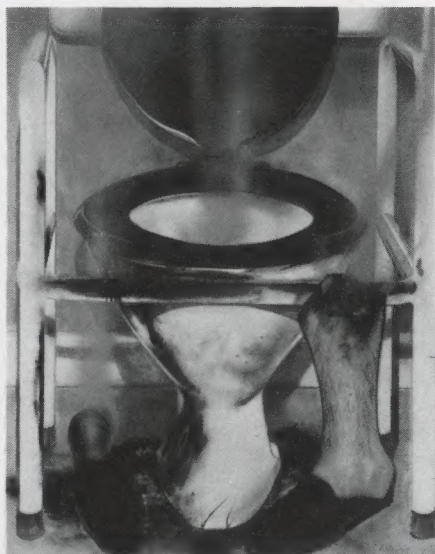
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